

'Cause we were just kids by [lovelysarcastic](#)

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Summary:

Mike Wheeler stopped talking one day, despite being able to. So far, no one knew why. So far, he hadn't talked.

But that would change.

And it changed in the warm Spring of 1983 when he was twelve years old and this girl joined their stupid hospital Hawkins A.V. Club.

1. Part 1

Dad always told me, “Don’t you cry when you’re down”

But mum, there’s a tear every time that I blink

One day, Mike Wheeler stopped talking.

He was eight years old and, when his mother picked him up at school, he refused – or that was what Karen Wheeler thought at the time – to answer any of her usual questions. At first, she was mad, thinking he was playing some kind of prank on her. After hours of trying to get him to talk, she got desperate. Her husband was away in a business trip and her older daughter, Nancy, who was twelve at the time, didn’t know what to do either and just bluntly complain how annoying her little brother was being. Mike didn’t react to anything. He didn’t even shrug. Just remained in his quiet corner, either reading a book, or watching TV. Around ten pm, out of despair, Karen called the police.

Jim Hopper had been the town’s chief of police for nine years now. He was a big guy, half-bald and with this huge, thick beard that made him look scarier than he actually was. He showed up, confused and integrated. *My boy doesn’t speak. At all.* Those were the words that Karen Wheeler had used on the phone and he had to come check for himself that she wasn’t just being an overdramatic mother whose son was throwing a tantrum about something stupid.

The boy, who was sitting in the dining-room, drinking a cup of warm milk, didn’t even look at the chief when he sat down in front of him.

“So, kid, how are you?” Jim started, putting down his hat.

The boy kept his eyes on the wooden table.

Jim Hopper frowned. He had some knowledge about who Karen Wheeler’s kids were and how they usually behaved, especially since he knew both of their parents and Hawkins was a really small town. He knew Nancy was this girl who always gave polite smiles because

she was ordered to and Mike only did it for the people he actually liked. Jim knew this because the boy had smiled at him once and Karen had said, *oh he likes you. He only smiles for the people he likes.*

“How was school, kid?” He tried again.

Mike grabbed his cup of warm milk and took a sip without even glancing at the man in front of him.

Jim Hopper’s frown deepened. Karen was standing by the dining-room’s entrance, looking scared and worried.

“Kid, are you going to talk to me?”

Mike finished his drink and said nothing.

Jim looked at Karen. She was hopeless, like a mother who had lost her child even though he was right here in this room and she could perfectly see him. He just didn’t talk.

Finally, they allowed the boy to go to bed. They found Nancy peeping at the top of the stairs, despite being past her bedtime. She ran away when she realized she had been caught, followed quietly by a mute Mike.

Karen took the chief to the door.

“Take him to a doctor, Karen. This isn’t my work to do,” Jim advised.

And that was what she did. But the doctor didn’t help at all. He said everything was okay with her son. Mike Wheeler’s vocal cords were healthy. He could talk if he wanted to. So, why didn’t he?

Karen then visited her neighbours, the Sinclair. Their youngest boy, Lucas, usually hung out with her son. They had classes together. Maybe he knew what was happening.

“He was fine at lunch time,” Lucas said. He was a scrawny, dark-skinned boy. “I didn’t see him after that. We don’t have the same classes during Monday’s afternoon.”

So, Karen Wheeler went to the school and talked to every teacher

Mike had. But none of them was helping, saying Mike behaved well and, yes, last time they checked, he was talking and participating during classes.

"He even talked to me after our class," said the English teacher, Mr. Carl Thomas, in his heavy accent. He was a tall man, with broad shoulders and this piercing, dark eyes that captivated most mothers. "Asking for advice about which books to read. He's a very clever boy, Karen."

Karen forced a smile at the teacher. She didn't want to hear how great her son was; she wanted to understand what was happening to him and no one was being helpful.

Well, no one until she went to talk to Mike's Art teacher, Miss Claire, and that was she finally got something.

"Oh, Mike missed yesterday's class," she told Karen. "I was actually going to talk to you about it in next week's meeting."

Karen blinked, confused. A teacher-parents meeting next week? What was that for? And then she remembered, summer vacation would begin in two weeks. It was at that meeting that she, like every parent, would know her children's grades and if they were going to be at the school's Top Ten Students Board. It was a ridiculous thing that the school created a couple years ago. Karen never approved of it, believing that kids should never compete in their education, but of course Ted had pressured both their kids to do their best and get a good place in that board.

Was it because of it that Mike wasn't speaking? Had the pressure been too high for him and he was now reacting like this?

"Do you... Do you know if my son is going to be in it?" She asked shyly.

Miss Claire blinked and hesitated in giving an answer.

"I don't care if he is or not, but... he isn't talking and... maybe that is why he isn't... My husband, you see, he really wanted our kids to be in the board and..."

"That hasn't been decided yet, Mrs. Wheeler," Miss Claire admitted.
"We'll have a reunion next week to decide that."

When Karen got home, she went to her son's bedroom (of course she hadn't let him go to school without understanding what was going on). He was still in his pyjamas and was reading an old comic book.

She sat down on the bed next to him.

"Mike?"

He kept reading his book.

She touched his chin and made him look at her.

"Why did you miss Miss Claire's class yesterday?"

Mike's eyes went wide-opened for a second and then he looked down at this book. Not one single word left his mouth.

Then I'll go back

To where I'm rescuing a stranger

Just because they needed saving just like that

Mike Wheeler spent his summer alone. His only friend, Lucas, tried to play with him and find things for them to do, but he got bored since he was the one doing all the talk. He understood that something was wrong with Mike, but he just couldn't continue spending his days giving monologues to someone who didn't even acknowledge his presence. So, he left for a summer camp.

Nancy tried to put up with her younger brother as well, but got tired of him after two days of having him following her around like a shadow.

"He doesn't talk, Mom!" She complained. "Do you know how crazy I

sound talking to him in the streets? He doesn't say anything back!"

"He's your brother, Nancy."

"Ugh, I don't care!"

Mike listened to all the conversation, but he never once stepped in to defend himself. He was reading the newspaper's front page. A local woman had gone missing a few months ago, and had yet been found. The police were inclined to believe she had ran away, despite her husband's protests that she would never leave her two sons behind.

"Mike, you shouldn't be reading these things." His mother took the newspaper away and walked into the living-room, where her husband was taking a nap in his old la-Z-boy recliner.

Ted Wheeler started ignoring his kid as a way of coping. Karen had already had so many fights with him about his attitude that she grew tired of them and him. Ted never once changed his mind.

"Maybe if we ignore him like he ignores us, then he'll talk," he would say over and over again, pissing his wife off.

This was their son he was talking about. He couldn't be ignored like that. He was hurting. She knew he was. She was his mother.

Every night, like always, she went to his room to tuck him in and say good night. She would ask him if he was okay and, in return, he would close his eyes. She assumed that was his way of saying yes since, one night, in the middle of the summer, she asked him that same question and he just kept staring at her.

"What do you need, sweetie?" She asked him, worried.

He blinked once.

"Do you want me to lay down with you?"

That was when he closed his eyes.

Time went by. Mike started a new school year. He didn't answer any questions during classes, only wrote down all the information he

needed and studied even more than in the previous year. He didn't participate in any post-school activities nor enjoyed P.E. classes. Kids never picked the kid that didn't talk. Lucas almost got into a fight with this asshole called Troy (he used to be a nice kid, but since his mother went missing that he just completely lost it), who started making fun of Mike and his quietness. It wasn't fair that people made fun of someone because of something they couldn't control.

"But you can, can't you?" Lucas realized as they walked home. "You can talk, Mike. I heard you talk..." He frowned. "I don't remember your voice anymore."

Mike looked at his friend and Lucas blinked in shock. This was the first time Mike had actually noticed him, instead of just looking ahead.

"Maybe you need time, right?" He suggested. "To recover..."

But recover from what?

Mike was ten years old when Jim Hopper showed up at his door and showed Karen this new medical division that was going to open at Hawkins Hospital.

"It's for kids with traumas," he explained, standing in the middle of the Wheeler's kitchen while Karen baked a cake.

"Mike doesn't have any trauma," Karen replied straightaway as if he had said insulting.

Jim Hopper sighed.

"He doesn't talk, Karen," he reminded her. "For two years, he hasn't talked. You gotta admit that the kid has some kind of trauma and this place –"he lifted the piece of paper he had brought her –"it can help him."

Karen gave Jim a stern look before going back to mixing the eggs and flour together. She had turned to baking since her son stopped talking. It was her way of coping and it was good and harmless, unlike her husband's way. Also, her need to bake had recently increased due to her pregnancy. She craved sweets more than before.

Hopper sighed.

“Well, I’m going to leave. John Harrington has been looking for me again.”

Karen rose her eyes guardedly.

“You still haven’t found her, eh?”

Jim shook his head.

“It’s been two years. Unless she shows up, I’m not going to find her,” he replied. Everyone in Hawkins assumed that was what happened to Lucy Harrington. She simply ran away and started a new life somewhere. “Well, anyways, good to see you, Karen. I’ll leave this here for you.” Jim took a few steps towards the counter and left the piece of paper on top of it before walking out the kitchen. He passed by the living-room, where Mike was doing his homework in front of the TV. They shared a quite long look before chief opened the door and left the house.

It took Karen one week to accept Jim’s idea and take her son to the hospital. She scheduled an appointment for him with the psychologist that would run the division and nervously awaited to see what it would bring to her son.

“It’s very simple,” Joyce Byers said with a small smile. She was petit woman, with brown hair and sweet eyes. “He’ll come here two or three times a week, engage in group activities and be around other kids who, unfortunately, have also been through some kind of troubles... Having them socializing is a way to show them that, you know, it’s okay to... well, it’s okay not to be okay.”

“I see,” Karen replied unsure. She glanced at her son, who kept staring at the psychologist.

“He will also have one-hour session with me three times a week at first. Then, when he starts to show progress, we’ll reduce the sessions. It’s quite simple, Mrs. Wheeler. You’ll see he will get better.”

“How do you know that?” She asked, afraid.

Joyce Byers' smile disappeared for a second.

"My son has been through the same," she confessed and turned over one of the pictures she had on her desk. It showed a small boy with brown hair and a gentle smile, just like his mother's. "He had panic attacks whenever he was in crowded places and couldn't talk in public. When I heard about this type of recovery process, I took him to one and – "She nodded – "it really has helped him, Mrs. Wheeler. Believe me. I thought I would never be able to take him out to a public place, but two days ago we were at a park and he even played with a dog."

That was all it took to convince Karen Wheeler to enrol her son in the group therapy.

"You'll like it, I promise," she said to her son as she tucked him in the night before his first session with Joyce Byers. She smiled fondly at him and stroke his hair. "Please, sweetie, please get better."

Mike blinked and then closed his eyes.

'Cause we were just kids when we fell in love

Not knowing what it was

When Mike Wheeler was ten years old, he was forced to go three days a week to a psychologist and engage in group activities with a bunch of kids that looked as messed up as he was. Or were even worse than he was. Because he just didn't talk. In his group, there was this redhead girl who screamed at people non-stop and then would hide in a corner, destroying dolls. There was this boy with curly brown locks that didn't have his front teeth and kept on going about fantasy and sci-fi books like they were a real thing. The first thing he ever told Mike was to be careful, he was sure Darth Vader was coming to Earth.

The first session Mike had with Joyce Byers was on a Monday at four pm. He kept staring at her, studying every detail of her face and clothes as she waited patiently for some reaction on his part. But it

never came.

"You know, Mike, no one's pain is stupid," she said out of the blue. He blinked. "I can see that you aren't okay. Maybe you don't talk because you think it's stupid? But I want you to know that it isn't. In this office, and out there, in that room where you will play with other kids, I want you to know that you will not once be judged."

Mike blinked again.

His session ended twenty minutes earlier.

Next thing he knew, he was in a room surrounded by other five kids. They got to introduced themselves, one by one. There were two girls, one named Max and the other Mary, and three boys, a Dustin, a Tommy and a Jeremy. When it got to Mike, he stared at them and Joyce introduced him to the group. They were also asked by the psychologist to give themselves a name. It would be fun that way, and it would bring them closer. So, thanks to the boy with no front teeth saying he had been in an A.V. club at school, they named themselves *Hawkins A.V. Club*. It sounded ridiculous, but Joyce Byers said they could try out a few things in that area if they wanted to. They could talk about shows and films they had seen and reviewed them together.

Mike met Will Byers on his second week there, during one of his obligatory two-hours of playing around in a hospital room with a bunch of messed-up kids. The psychologist brought in her son to talk to the kids and show them how they could also improve.

It didn't make sense to Mike how a kid that used to have panic attacks could help him, a boy who didn't talk. But he went along with the game and, when the kid sat down next to him at one of the round tables, he managed to look up and stare at him.

"My name is Will," he said and pointed to the small tag on his green t-shirt that had his name on. "You're Mike," he added, nodding at the small tag that Mike also had on his jacket.

Mike blinked.

“You only blink. Why?” He asked.

Mike blinked again.

“Don’t bother with him,” the redhead girl, whose name was Max, sat down in front of them with a beheaded doll. “He never talks. He’s boring like that.”

“You shouldn’t say those things,” Will stated. “Everyone is as how they can be. You can’t judge.”

The redhead girl stared at him, frowning, and then threw the beheaded doll across the room and started screaming.

Max Winters was a ten-year-old girl whose mother was a junkie that forgot about her existence too many times over the past years, leaving her home alone to starve. It was only in the previous year that the neighbours decided to actually do something and call the cops. She was now living in an orphanage, surrounded by dozens of other abandoned children who suffocated her more than the hours she had spent alone in her old house. That was why Max screamed, so she could be noticed.

Dustin Henderson was also ten years old and he didn’t have his front teeth because of this health issue that he had. The name was always too big for Mike to memorize, but Dustin talked about it many times. His parents decided to enrol him on this medical program because Dustin had been bullied by his classmates since kindergarten. Kids made fun of him because of everything: his missing teeth, his hair, his weight, the way he spoke. So, Dustin, alone and scared, turned to books and sci-fi stories for help. He got so into them that he couldn’t tell the reality from the fantasy apart and now believed there were hobbits out there and that he was going to join the Rebel Alliance.

Will Byers had a dad who never cared about his wife or two kids. Will started having panic attacks when in crowded places since he had been forgotten in them by his dad too many times to count. Now, he was better and wanted to help other kids get better as well.

Mike Wheeler stopped talking one day, despite being able to. So far, no one knew why. So far, he hadn’t talked.

But that would change.

And it changed in the warm Spring of 1983 when he was twelve years old and this girl joined their stupid hospital *Hawkins A.V. Club*. He stared at her as Joyce Byers brought her into the room with the chief behind them. The girl had long, white socks that went up until her knees and was wearing a pink dress that reminded him of his older sister Nancy's favourite dress when she had been younger. Now it was kept in one of dozens of boxes in the basement for little Holly to use when she grew up.

"Children, please welcome your new friend, Jane Ives," Joyce announced.

Jane Ives had a buzz-cut hair, which gave her the spotlight between the other two girls in the group, whose hairs were long, below the shoulders. She also didn't like to be touched and Mike noticed that right away when the psychologist tried to touch her shoulder and she stepped away.

She didn't talk much. She was probably the second most quiet person in the room, right after Mike. And she was really pretty.

She sat down in one of the round tables, staring at everyone with a scared look. No one knew how to react in her presence. They had all begun group therapy together and, so far, there had not been new members. They weren't sure of how they were supposed to behave, so they kept on going with their usual games and conversations, leaving the girl alone.

Shyly, Mike Wheeler grabbed two blank papers and the box of crayons and walked up to the new girl. He showed them to her and she nodded. He then sat down next to her and they started drawing together.

Outside the room, by the glass window, Joyce Byers had her mouth wide-opened while Jim Hopper frowned, confused.

"I thought you hadn't made any progress with the Wheeler kid," he stated after a while.

"And I didn't," she answered, watching how Mike Wheeler passed a pink crayon to the new girl. "The most I could do is having him nod at people and sometimes point at things. I... He... He never intentionally engaged in any group activity on his own."

Mike noticed how the new girl's tag had a number written on it, so he pointed at it, making sure he kept his distance, until she realized what he wanted and turned over her drawing. She started drawing stick figures. The first two were bigger than the rest. She kept doing them until she filled the page. Then, she counted the heads and, when she stopped at the last one, which was the eleventh without counting the two big stick figures, she circled it and pointed to herself. Mike nodded, understanding. She was the eleventh daughter of a big family.

"And you?" She asked shyly.

He drew his parents, his older sister Nancy, himself and his younger sister, Holly.

Jane Ives smiled softly at the picture. As he felt his heart skipped a beat, Mike moved his arm and a crayon fell on the floor. Jane leaned down to pick it up and he noticed a white patch on the back of her neck, which also covered a bit of her shaved hair. Mike blinked, confused and was about to point at it and ask her what it was, when she came back up, and his eyes went to how her dress' sleeve had risen and there were strange, red dots on her arm. She saw it too and carefully pulled the sleeve down again. Mike blinked again and pointed at his own arm, trying to understand what they were.

Shyly, Jane Ives picked a small corner of her paper and drew a cylindrical thing with small waves coming out of it.

It took Mike a few seconds to realize it was a cigarette. His eyes were wide-opened as he looked up at her. Embarrassed, she flipped the page and went back to her first drawing. He didn't get the courage to ask her about the white patch.

Will Byers showed up halfway through the two-hour session and talked to Jane for a bit. She actually confessed that she preferred to be called Eleven since that's what her siblings had always called her.

“Oh, Eleven, that’s cool,” Will said.

Mike stared at him serious. Will noticed and asked him if he was okay. But the boy didn’t react, like usual.

Eventually, Will left them alone. Snack time came shortly after. This very nice, young redhead girl who volunteered at the hospital, told them to sit around the biggest round table, in the middle of the room, and brought in their food. It was usually a piece of bread with cheese and an orange juice.

At six pm, Karen Wheeler parked her car in the hospital parking lot. She took her youngest daughter from her seat and walked into the hospital. She called for the lift and went to the fifth floor. Nancy had stayed at home, studying for this biology test she had.

Ironically, she found Nancy’s classmate, Barbara, who was leaving the children’s room with a trolley of dirty napkins and used plastic glasses.

“Oh, Barb, how are you?” Karen asked her nicely.

“Very well, Mrs. Wheeler. The kids are doing great today. They have a new friend,” Barb answered with a short smile.

“Oh, that’s good.” Karen moved Holly’s weight in her arms to release some tension from them. “It’s very nice of you to take your study time to help these kids. I heard you were going to have a biology test this week.”

Barb blinked, confused, and then, let out a short “Ahh, sure.” And forced a small smile.

Karen knew her older daughter had lied to her. Yet, she politely said goodbye to Barb and went to find Joyce Byers. She could deal with Nancy later.

“Well, it’s quite extraordinary,” the psychologist told her. “Mike actively chose to integrate the new girl into the group. It was very interesting to watch.”

Karen Wheeler was so happy that she couldn’t even know how to

start reacting. Should she smile? Should she jump happily? Should she hug the psychologist and thank her? After all, Joyce could have given up on Mike. He had barely made any progresses in two years. Even she thought about giving up sometimes. Of course, Joyce had been there for her, saying that no, they still could help Mike.

Joyce opened the children's room. Dustin, who Karen liked a lot because he never cared about Mike's quietness, wasn't there today. The boy had improved over the years and only came once a week now. Mike still came the three days.

Her son was sitting in one of the room's corners with a book on his hands and a little girl, whose head was shaved, next to him. They kept a small distance between their bodies, but were both very interested in the book in front of them.

"What's her story?" Karen asked in a murmur to the psychologist.

"Too many siblings. A bad father. A distant mother," Joyce murmured back as they approached the kids. "Mike," she called.

Both Mike and Eleven lifted their heads from the book. Seeing his mother, Mike turned to the little girl with sad eyes. She smiled softly.

"Come on, it's time to go home," Joyce said gently.

Mike stood up and went to put the book back to its place. He came back and shyly waved at the girl. She waved back.

Karen grabbed her son's hand and pulled him with her to leave the room. Mike looked back, watching the girl as he walked away, and then the door closed, separating them.

Mike Wheeler thought he never felt true sadness until that moment.

He wanted to go back and be next to Eleven. He wanted to show her pictures in books and make drawings together. He liked her presence. He liked her smile. He liked how she didn't care that he never spoke.

He saw their car parked and before they could reach it, he pulled his mother's hand. She looked down at him and blinked, surprised.

“What is it, sweetie?” She asked.

And she wasn’t expecting an answer. In four years, her son never replied to any of her questions.

But today... today was different.

Mike opened his mouth and said in a rough, tiny voice, “Can Eleven come with us?”

2. Part 2

She is messy but she's kind

She is lonely most of the time

She is all of this mixed up

And baked in a beautiful pie

“He said what now?” Jim Hopper’s frown deepened as he tried to comprehend the psychologist’s words.

“He likes her,” Joyce explained. “And he asked his mother to let her live with them.”

Hopper scratched his neck, confused.

“The kid didn’t talk for four years and this is what gets him to talk? A girl?”

Joyce shrugged, having the same questions herself.

“What do you think, Hop?”

The chief sighed.

“I only have her for a short period, you know, in a temporary custody since she was taken away from her family and someone had to stay responsible for her. If the Wheelers want, they can adopt her. I don’t know.”

“That thought didn’t cross Karen’s mind,” Joyce answered, worried. “But I don’t think she’ll consider it... I mean, she already has three kids.”

And she didn’t, of course. When Joyce talked to Karen about it, the woman shook her head and then tried to keep Holly from falling on her butt on the psychologist’s office floor.

"I have three kids," she said. "I can't take a fourth, Joyce."

"Mike will be disappointed," Joyce remarked, not to change her mind, but just to state a fact. He would be.

Karen sighed.

"He hasn't spoken again. Not to me, at least. Does he speak to her?"

Joyce nodded.

"Sometimes, they whisper to each other. But they mostly spent time... communicating with gesticulations and drawings. It's quite fascinating."

Karen's expression changed, becoming more concerned and scared. What was she supposed to do now?

"Maybe they can spend more time together," Joyce advised. "Outside here, you see?"

"Yes... Yes, I think that would be a good idea."

So, Karen went to the police station to talk to the chief. His secretary asked her to wait a minute since Jim was in what was supposedly meant to be an important meeting. She sat down on one of those really uncomfortable chairs and tried to keep Holly in her lap. The toddler was at that age in which she loved to explore everything around her. But, after what happened with Mike, Karen grew obsessed with not letting her youngest daughter out of her sight. Even when Holly was still in her womb, Karen was always making sure that she could feel her moving.

It took about five minutes to Karen realized that Jim's important meeting was actually the delusional and almost considered insane husband of Lucy Harrington, the woman who went missing around four years ago. Jim had to literally drag him outside the police station and take a small break to smoke a cigarette before going in and talking to Karen.

"He still comes here?" Karen asked him, surprised, as she sat down in front of his desk. Hopper's office was tidier than his entire house. It

was also very brown. At least, the chairs were comfortable.

“Yup, sometimes every week, other times once a month...” Jim rubbed his forehead. “What can I do for you today, Karen?”

“Well, Joyce told me you were in charge of that girl...”

“Well, I’m not entirely in charge of her. I just... She is temporarily living with me since we did not want her to get lost in the system.” Yet was the word that the chief purposely left out.

“But, well, for now, she is with you and... Well, you see, my son-“

“Yes, I know,” Hopper interrupted her. “I was there too when the girl first joined the group. I was the one that took her. He liked her.”

“Yes, and I was wondering... Do you think that she could spend some afternoons in my place? When Mike isn’t at the hospital, she can come and play with him... Even at the weekends.”

Hopper frowned for a second and then shrugged.

“Well, sure. As long as it’s in a safe environment, she is free to go wherever she wants.”

When Karen Wheeler told her son that unfortunately, his friend couldn’t come live with them, but she could spend more time with him after school, her son did something that he had rarely done in the past four years: he smiled and said, “thank you, Mom”. Karen almost cried hearing her son calling her mom again.

So, Jane Ives, or like Mike called her, Eleven, started going to their house every afternoon, except on Sundays, when she had to go somewhere with Hopper. In the days that they both had to go to the hospital for the group therapy, Jane usually stayed for dinner and the chief was sometimes invited to tag along. Holly was really happy to see another girl in the house. Nancy tried to pretend that she didn’t care, but was actually pleased that her younger brother was finally making progresses. Ted... Well, Ted just went along with his way of coping, which meant he also started to ignore the little girl who was friends with the son he had ignored for the past four years.

After picking up her son at school and then Jane Ives at the police station, Karen Wheeler gave them the freedom to do whatever they wanted *inside the house*, while she baked whatever came to her mind. She put Holly down for a nap before basically locking herself in the kitchen baking. She started with chocolate cookies and tried to make them in time for her son and his friend's snack time.

Around four pm, Karen heard the door opening and closing with a loud bang. She sighed and called out for her older daughter. Nancy, who had grown up to be a petit, beautiful sixteen-year-old, showed up at the kitchen's entrance, holding a bunch of books in her arms and her bag on her shoulder.

The teenager gave her mother a bored look.

"What is it?"

"I need to talk to you," Karen said. "Can you please sit down for a bit with me?"

Nancy sighed and went to sit on the kitchen's table. She watched as her mother washed and cleaned her hands before joining her, and then how she was hesitant in starting the conversation. So, Nancy did the math and knew something bad was coming her way.

"Nancy, I... I know that I focus too much on Mike sometimes, and on Holly as well because... Well, you understand, right?" Nancy nodded cautiously. "I don't do it on purpose, I just... they need me like you didn't need me. But that... Well, that doesn't give you the right to push me away or lie to me."

Nancy blinked, confused.

"What are you talking about?"

"I saw Barb a few weeks ago at the hospital... When you had that biology test... Well, I'm not dumb, Nancy, I know when people are caught in a lie. And I've noticed other things too. Like when you say you are going to hang out with Barb, or study at the library and-"

"Mom, honestly," Nancy sat up straight. "Those aren't lies. I did have a biology test. So what it wasn't precisely on that week, but the next

one? So what I tell you I'm always going to hang out with Barb, because she's the only one you actually bothered to know about my friends? So what, Mom?"

Karen stayed quiet, trying to keep eye contact with her daughter and not look ashamed. Because she had been a bit of a distant mom for Nancy, always putting Mike and Holly's needs first. She knew that.

"I just don't want you to think that you have to lie to me..."

Nancy shook her head. "I don't think that," she replied, trying to be honest, but her tone of voice gave away her annoyance. "Can I go now?"

Karen nodded and watched her daughter gather her things and leave the kitchen. She heard her steps going up the stairs and then her bedroom's door closing. She let out a sad sigh and stood up, going back to her baking.

Around five pm, her son showed up, followed by the shy friend he had made at the hospital. Karen noticed that the girl was wearing one of Mike's old blue sweatshirts and the sleeves were too big for her tiny arms.

"Mom," Mike said in a croaky tone of voice, "can we eat something?"

Karen smiled brightly, trying to push away the deep sadness that kept knocking on her soul's door.

"Of course, sweetie. I've fresh chocolate cookies for you. Come, sit."

Mike and his friend sat down next to each other. Karen noticed that they had brought a small notebook and pencils with them. As she approached them with two glasses of orange juice, she took a peek of what was on it. She frowned, curious, seeing random illustrations drawn, completely done in arbitrary spots of the paper. They didn't make any sense, but Mike and Jane seemed to understand its pattern and kept on drawing things to each other. Karen put down the glasses, to which the girl smiled at her a silent thank-you, and went to grab a plate of cookies for them to eat.

When she returned to her almost ready-to-go-to-the-oven cake, she

kept staring at her son and his new friend. They never shared a word, instead they drew and made small movements with their hands until the other one understood the message.

Why didn't they use their words? They could speak.

At one point, the little girl touched her shaved head and then drew something. Karen had asked Joyce about the girl's hair, since it had intrigued about why a twelve-year-old girl had a shaved hair. The psychologist had answered with a revolted expression, "Her father put it on fire because it was too big and didn't want to take her to the hair saloon.... The fire was put out before it was too late, thank God." That was why the girl was taken from her family. A neighbour, who had thankfully come around to ask for salt, saw the father light up the girl's hair on fire and stopped everything before it got worse. He also called the cops and that was when Jim Hopper came into action.

The Ives lived in the surrounds of Hawkins. They barely came into the city centre, spending most of their time in neighbouring cities, where most of their small jobs and friends were, so Karen had never heard about them, nor most of the neighbourhood, until this girl showed up and her son decided he wanted to be friends with her.

Karen finally placed the cake inside the oven, which was already hot since it had been on almost all afternoon. She checked the kitchen's clock, which hung above the entrance, and memorized the time to take the cake out. Then, she looked back at the table, where her son and the girl were, and hesitated in joining them there. But soon she realized that it was a ridiculous thing to be afraid of, so she poured herself a glass of orange juice as well and sat down in front of them. They had already turned the page and were starting a new line of drawings. There were flowers in it and funny circles with lines inside of it.

Curious, Karen leaned over a bit to study the drawings, and finally realized, "Are those eggos?"

Both children rose their heads and nodded.

"Do you like eggos, Jane?" She asked the little girl.

“Eleven,” her son corrected her.

Karen blinked, confused. Then, she remembered the girl’s nickname came from the fact she was the eleventh daughter of a big family and that was basically how she was treated as back at her old home. Instead of using their names, Terry and Thomas Ives called their sons and daughters by the number they had arrived at the family and got them so used to those nicknames that, even among themselves, they referred to each other like that. They were eleven kids, Joyce had confided in her, between the ages of twelve and twenty-one.

“Eleven, sorry,” Karen amended with a soft smile.

The small girl smiled back.

“Yes,” she answered. “A lot.”

“Well, next time, I’ll give you eggos,” Karen promised.

The girl looked at Mike with such happy eyes that he smiled at her and then at his mother before saying, “Thank you, Mom.”

It pained Karen hearing her son talking, yet it made her so damn happy. She controlled the tears and replied, “Oh, you’re welcome, sweetie.”

Hopper came to pick Jane up around six pm. Mike’s facial expression turned sullen and the smile that he had carried throughout the entire afternoon disappeared. Seeing his mood, Jane, who had already put on her coat and forgot to take off Mike’s sweatshirt, went to him and hugged him tightly. Mike’s cheekbones went red and he avoided both his mother and the chief’s eyes. When Jane pulled back, she smiled softly and murmured to him, “Promise.”

That word made Mike smile again.

Cause I’ve been by myself all night long

Hoping you’re someone I used to know

“He’s obsessed with her,” Karen Wheeler announced.

Behind her desk, Joyce blinked.

“Oh, that’s... bad.”

“No,” Karen disagreed. “Because she’s obsessed with him too.”

It had been four months since Jane Ives was introduced to the *Hawkins A.V. Club* and three months and three weeks since she started to go every afternoon to the Wheeler’s house to spend time with Mike. Karen was really happy with the fact that her boy had a such a close friend, that he finally talked again, even if it was only from time to time, and that he had made progresses also with other kids. After seeing that his friend was talking again, Lucas Sinclair now volunteered at the hospital and spent two afternoons per week in the group sessions, helping the kids out. He and Will Byers had become close friends.

Everything had gone well in these past four months, unlike the previous years. Holly’s vocabulary had expanded since she started going to neighbour’s house, to hang out with their four-year-old daughter. Nancy had started working as a waitress at Benny Hammond’s diner to earn some money for college. She didn’t have to work, like her father enjoyed reminding her, but she wanted to. It was a way of actually doing something interesting in her free time and of being outside her house. Alongside with her, there was the old son of the woman that went missing four years ago, Steve Harrington. Karen had the pleasure of meeting him a few times now since he was the one that brought Nancy home after late shifts. He was a nice boy, who you could see had some insecurity haunting him.

Mike had spent his summer showing El (Karen was now used to call the girl by her nickname since her son always treated her by it) the city and discovering new, secret places that only he and she knew about. They had also spent afternoons at the lake with Lucas, Will and, to Karen’s surprise, Dustin Henderson, who had managed to leave the fantasy world behind and now understood what was real

and what wasn't. He had been one of the very first to make progresses in Joyce's medical division, followed by Tommy, a boy that used to bite himself.

So, yes, everything was going well.

But today's morning had been different. At first, it seemed like a normal Saturday. Mike came down from his bedroom, already with a backpack, ready to go explore the city with El, and sat down at the table, ignoring his father like his father ignored him. He grabbed a few cold French toasts from the big plate that Karen had placed at the centre of the table, and poured himself a glass of cold milk.

Karen looked at him with a soft smile, happy that her son was somehow behaving more lively, more like a happy kid.

That was when he said, "Mom, can El sleep here tonight?"

Karen blinked and looked over at her husband, who simply ignored his son's question and kept on reading his newspaper. Holly let out an annoyed noise since her mother had forgotten to give her more toast.

Karen reacted, cutting another French toast into four little pieces and giving one to her daughter. Then, she looked at her son.

"But... Why?"

"We want to build a fort in the basement and watch films," he said, looking hopefully at his mother.

Karen couldn't deny her son what he wanted. Not when it was something that made him happy, that got him to talk and be a child. So, she nodded in agreement. At that precise moment, her husband cleared his throat, dropped the newspaper on the table and left the room. A clear sign that he wasn't happy with her decision, but, being the grown-up he was, he preferred to stay out of it and then argue with her in the privacy of their room.

That was what led Karen to call Joyce and then go to her office.

"Well, they are very close friends," the psychologist said.

“They are obsessed with each other, Joyce,” Karen replied. “Do you know the last time my son had a sleepover? When he was seven. With Lucas Sinclair. So far, he has never once asked nor accepted an invitation for a sleepover. He is better, spends time with his other friends, yes, but he...” She didn’t know how to finish the sentence. She didn’t know how to explain to the psychologist that this request from her son was odd, completely out of his character, because of everything that had happened in these past four years. From all of his friends, asking to be Eleven to come have a sleepover? That was odd. At least, to Karen, it was.

“Well, they are good friends, Karen,” Joyce repeated. “And they’ve helped each other get better.”

“But what if...” Karen went quiet for a moment and looked around the white office. For the first time, she hadn’t brought Holly with her. Ted had taken their daughter to a zoo that afternoon. “What if... it’s more than friendship?”

Joyce let out a small laugh.

“Karen, they are twelve.”

“And?”

Joyce stared at her.

“Okay, I see your point,” she confessed and moved around her seat, ending up straightening her back and laying her elbows on the desk. “But those two have been through some rough times, Karen. They don’t even think like two... two normal kids. I didn’t want to use the word ‘normal’, but... you see my point, right?”

Karen frowned.

“My son hasn’t been through anything rough,” she replied. “He simply-“

“You don’t stop talking for years for no reason, Karen,” Joyce interrupted her. “You have to start admitting to yourself that... Yes, your son has some kind of trauma that showed itself as muteness.” There was a quiet moment between the two women and then the

psychologist added, “Don’t you worry about your son. Not now, not when he’s doing great and has a friend that comprehends him.”

When chief Jim Hopper showed up at the Wheeler’s house to drop off Eleven for a sleepover with the Wheeler kid, he wasn’t very secure of how safe this environment could be. He had talked to Joyce as well. She had given him the same advice that Karen heard. *Let them be friends. It’s good for them.* But he was a boy and she was a girl. And they had already gone through that age where it was okay for them to have a mixed sleepover. Hadn’t they?

“Can I ring the doorbell?” Eleven asked shyly.

He nodded and motioned with his hand to the door, allowing her to step forward. She smiled and almost tiptoed to get to the doorbell and ring it twice.

Hopper was feeling nervous, dropping off Eleven for a sleepover with a boy. He didn’t even know what to tell her. He had tried to say that she should be careful that night (because he did not want funny business between them two) and Eleven had frowned and replied, “But it’s Mike. Why should I be careful?”. Jim had had no answer for her. Because she was right. It was Mike.

Mike was the one that opened the door. He had a very excited look on his face that flicked away for just a second when he saw the chief.

“Good night, Mr. Hopper,” he greeted politely.

“G’night, kid,” he replied and almost touched Eleven’s shoulder before pulling his hand away and dropping it by his side. “Well, you two have fun,” he added and cleared his throat.

“We will,” Eleven said with a smile.

She walked in and they both waved at Hopper before closing the door. The chief stood still for a second, confused and wondering if he should knock and say anything else. Then, he shook his head and walked back to his truck.

Inside the house, Mike took Eleven to the basement, where he had already gathered a bunch of sheets, pillows and blankets to make the

fort. She put down her bag on top of the sofa and then moved to give him a hug. Mike's heart skipped a beat, like it always did when she got too close.

Eleven didn't like people touching her after years of associating touch with pain. So, when she first hugged Mike, the first time she came to his house and they spent it reading comic books and talking through drawings, it had shocked him and made him the happiest boy on earth.

After pulling back, Mike pointed to the small table in one of the basement's corners, filled with boxes on top of it, as a way of telling Eleven that it was there that their fort was going to be built. She smiled and nodded. So, he grabbed a sheet and, with her help, strategically put it over the table and the boxes. They had to move it a bit away from the wall, so the sheet would also cover that side of the table. After it, they moved the chairs to a good position in order for the other sheet to remain well stretched on top of them.

Karen Wheeler showed up in the basement by the time that Mike and Eleven were arranging the thickest blankets on the fort's floor. She smiled at the scene.

"What a beautiful fort," she said and they both smiled proudly. "Who wants dinner?"

Eleven stood up before Mike did. She stopped still, looking at him, as he crawled out of the fort and stood up as well. They followed Karen upstairs to the dining-room, where Nancy was already putting together Holly's plate and Ted was impatiently waiting. When he saw his son and the girl, he sat back against the chair and avoided looking at them as they each picked a seat at the table, next to Nancy.

Dinner was quiet, with Karen trying to keep up small conversations, but everyone else destroying them with short answers. She gave up after a while and ate her dinner, frustrated. She got even more frustrated with the glances her husband was throwing the shaved-head girl that was friends with their son. Even Nancy was noticing and was getting mad. Mike was a nutcase, Nancy had once told her friends who had teased her about him, but he was still her brother and no one could talk trash about him. Not even give him a sideways

glance.

Mike leaned over to El and whispered something in her ear. She gave him a small smile in return, which made him smile as well.

Ted Wheeler let out a loud sound and everyone stared at him.

“Is there something wrong, Dad?” Nancy asked.

“No,” he mumbled.

Karen tried to control herself from starting an argument in the middle of dinner time. Both Eleven and Mike were a bit confused, unaware that Ted was acting like that because of them. And she wanted to keep it that way.

But, of course, Nancy didn’t think like that.

“If you have something to say, say it, Dad.”

Ted gave him daughter a death stare.

“There’s nothing to be said, Nancy. Eat your dinner now.”

“Dad-“

“Nancy,” Karen called. “Please.”

Nancy sent both her parents an exasperated look before standing up, grabbing her plate and saying she was done for the night.

No, Nancy Wheeler wasn’t the best older sister that one could have. Really, she wasn’t. Not even Holly could tell you that and she was just a toddler. She knew she had been selfish and still was towards her little brother’s situation. But that didn’t mean that she ever stopped loving her brother like a sister should love. So, having her dad keep acting like an asshole and not doing his job as a father properly really pissed her off.

Dessert was allowed to be taken somewhere else, so Mike and Eleven took their plates with chocolate cake to the basement. Mike prepared the TV, moving it in front of the fort, and put on the first film they

were going to see that night, E.T. The second one would be *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*, which Dustin had asked a million times for Eleven to see, so she could understand its awesomeness.

They sat down next to each other inside the fort, taking their time eating their slice of chocolate cake, as the first minutes of the film began. Eleven was mesmerized by it. She had rarely seen films in her life. Back at her old home, the TV was usually for Dad and his friends. Mom was always out either working or hanging out with her co-workers, trying to avoid her messy house. Her siblings never really cared about TV, being used to not getting to see anything in it. Eleven was the one that always tried to take a peek of it, when her Dad was in the living-room with his buddies, watching films. She had been caught a couple of times and that had cost her a few scars.

After seeing she was done with the cake, Mike took the plate from her hands carefully and then placed it along his outside the fort, on the wooden floor. They shared a soft smile and went back to watching the film.

Mike was nervous.

Being so close to Eleven made his hands sweat and his heart beat fast. It was always like this. But tonight was different, because she was closer than the usual. He understood, without words being needed, that Eleven had had a rough childhood. Touching meant hurting, especially coming from adults. But she always accepted Mike's presence around her. And, step by step, he had been allowed to get closer and closer and she never once backed away, saying that was enough, he had to step back. No, she always let him shorten the distance between their bodies. Right now, there was just a few inches between their arms and Mike could almost feel the warmth of her body. If he moved a bit, his t-shirt would brush against her sweatshirt. For some reason, that possibility pumped his veins with adrenaline. Knowing that they were that close, that she felt his body temperature as he felts hers, made him sweat and wonder how it would actually feel to touch her skin. Just her hand. That was all Mike wanted. To hold Eleven's hand.

His wish came true halfway through the film. Suddenly, he felt something cold against his hand. He discreetly looked down and saw

Eleven's shy hand touching the back of his. So, he turned his hand around and her fingers met his and closed in a gentle grip.

Mike's heart never beat so fast.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you so much for your comments. I hope you've enjoyed this chapter as well.

3. Part 3

Notes for the Chapter:

Before starting, I want to warn you that I have gone back and change one or two things in the previous chapters. After I reread my story, I realized that I had messed up a bit in the timeline, since I was too invested in the plot and the characters. I want to apologize for that. So, now Mike and Eleven's first meeting was in May, not in the summer.

Why don't you be you

And I'll be me

How was Nancy supposed to do it? Break up with someone whose mother had abandoned him years ago. Someone who had trust issues higher than the Statue of Liberty.

Nancy knew she shouldn't have started dating Steve Harrington. Her friend, Barb, warned her about it. *Don't do it. He is traumatized by a woman leaving. What do you think will happen when you leave?* Nancy wished she could argue that she wouldn't leave him, but she knew better than that since she was only sixteen and, from the beginning, Steve Harrington had just been a summer fling, which was already lasting too long, not her true love. True love didn't exist.

"Why do you have flowers?" Nancy asked her younger brother, who was climbing up the stairs with a bunch of daisies in his hands. They were clearly stolen from some garden since they all had different sizes and dirt on their roots.

"It's for Eleven," Mike said and rearranged his school backpack's over his right shoulder.

Nancy blinked. She still got surprised when her brother actually replied to her, only used to getting a shrug or a nod from him.

"Oh, that's... sweet of you," she tried to sound serious, but it came out as a sarcastic comment. Mike looked at her, confused. "You should have asked for money and bought some at the flower shop. Those are all dirty."

Mike shrugged and walked into his bedroom.

Faced with a closed door, Nancy turned and checked herself in the hallway's mirror before climbing down the stairs. Steve would be here any second to take her to the films. Her mother was in the kitchen, baking like always. Holly was in the living-room, watching her cartoons, and her dad was in a business trip. Thank God for that.

"Be home by eleven," her mother remembered her.

Nancy sighed. "I know, Mom."

She would probably be home much sooner than that.

"Did you know that Mike has brought flowers home?"

Karen nodded as she squeezed a white cream into fresh baked cookies.

"They are for Eleven," she replied.

"He gets a lot of stuff for Eleven," Nancy stated.

Her mother didn't answer, although she agreed. Mike barely spoke (despite speaking more now than in the previous years), but when he did, most of the time the name Eleven was in his sentence, and it was usually followed by a request. Last week, for example, they spent an entire Saturday doing this Hawkins itinerary that Mike had pulled together. They literally left the house around ten am and only returned for dinner.

Finally, a honk echoed from outside. Nancy grabbed her coat and left the house, ignoring her mother's second reminder to be home by eleven. Steve waved at her, excited, from inside the car, and she forced a smile.

How was she supposed to do this?

They had been going out since August, so around six months now. It was terrible, really. She had liked Steve a lot and she still liked him... but not as a boyfriend. As a friend. How did she explain that to a boy that had trust issues craved into his body and soul by a mother who ran away without a word?

She didn't run away, Steve told her once, *she is missing and no one gives a shit*. And they never talked again about that. The memory of Lucy Harrington still haunted their house, especially their dad, John. Sometimes Nancy didn't understand how Steve could be so optimistic and normal, unlike his father who kept bothering the police time after time and his brother who went around burning things and annoying other people. He had annoyed Mike at one point, she knew that. And she also made sure he never tried to bother him again. Of course, Mike would never know that.

"So, are you excited?"

Nancy didn't even know which film they were going to see. She sighed and turned to her boyfriend, who was about to start the car.

"We need to talk," she said before they left her house's front yard.

Steve's happy facial expression disappeared and he killed the car's engine. He looked down, a bit lost, as if those words had said everything that Nancy had yet actually spoken.

"Steve, I—"

"Why?" He asked. "What did I do wrong?"

There were tears in his eyes.

"No, it's not you... I... I just don't see myself in a relationship right now. But I like you, Steve. As a friend. I d—"

Steve let out a loud sob. Nancy backed away, almost hitting the passenger's door.

"But... But... But..." Steve kept on crying.

Nancy looked around, without knowing what to do.

“This isn’t fair!” He exclaimed, making her jump. “Nancy, come on...”

She shook her head.

“No, Steve. I-“

He cried louder.

She rubbed her face, completely frustrated, and then looked back at the boy crying in front of her.

“Should I go?” She asked.

To her surprise, he tried to grab her, while shouting “No, please don’t!”

Mommy issues. Trust issues. Needy. Why did Nancy get herself into this situation?

So, instead of going to the films with her boyfriend, she spent the next hours taking care of her ex-boyfriend, inside his car and just outside her house.

A few streets away from there, Hopper was putting the dirt dishes into the dishwasher with Eleven. She was humming happily while passing him the glasses used during dinner.

Despite the growth, her hair was still very short. Hopper’s first impression of her had been that she was actually a boy and he had felt really ashamed when realizing she was actually a girl. Some of the neighbours had thought that too at the beginning, but Eleven made her identity clear by using dresses or skirts most of the time. Of course, her legs and arms were always covered. When Hopper had arrived at the Ives’ house, the girl had already been taken to the hospital. He later saw the pictures from her medical examination. That girl carried more scars than he would ever do. Right now, the one which was most visible was the burn on the back of her neck, that had caught a bit of her hairline. As the months passed by, the burn started to heal, turning into an unlevelled, roughened white spot of skin that everyone could see since most clothes didn’t cover it up. He knew the girl was ashamed of it.

Eleven had been living with him for almost ten months now. The social security had already sent someone to talk to him about the girl's situation. She had been with him for too long now and they wanted to move her to an orphanage in case he didn't accept to move further with the custody. Become her legal and permanent guardian. That was a task that Jim Hopper never thought he would face. Not after his daughter's death.

"She's pretty," Eleven said out of the blue. She looked up at him and smiled softly. "Your daughter."

He blinked, confused. It was like she had just read his mind. And then, he noticed the photograph he kept of his daughter on the fridge. Eleven saw it every day.

"Oh, yes," he murmured. "She was."

Could he do it? Could he be a dad again? No, those weren't the questions he should be asking. He should wonder if Eleven actually wanted a dad figure in her life.

"Do you miss being a dad?" She asked him.

Hopper closed the dishwasher, which he wouldn't turn on tonight since there was still space for more dishes, and motioned with his hand to the living-room. Eleven understood and followed him to the sofa. They always watched a bit of TV before bedtime.

"You didn't answer," she reminded him.

Hopper sighed.

"Yes."

She went quiet for a while.

Jim Hopper lost his daughter around ten years ago. She had only been six and it had crushed him deeply to have lost a life so important to him so soon. During the grief process, he turned to his work as his wife left him for another man and another city. He never questioned what life would look like if Sarah was still alive. But he questioned many times how it was possible that there were people

out there having kids and simply not giving a shit about them. Janes Ives, or like she was used to be called, Eleven, was a story that broke his heart. Because she was alive and her parents just didn't give a shit about her. Even worse, they hurt her. Her dad was a piece of shit of a human being that was *still* awaiting trial and the final decision would depend on whether Eleven had the courage to talk in front of a courtroom full of people or not.

"Who are going to be my parents now?" She suddenly asked him.

Hopper glanced at her.

"Whoever you want," he answered. It was kind of a lie since she was one step away from getting into the system and being dropped at an orphanage. But he couldn't just tell her that. Unlike what most people believed, Jim Hopper still had a heart.

"Can you be it?"

Hopper froze for a second and then looked at Eleven, surprised. She was biting her bottom lip, nervous.

"Do you want that?"

She nodded shyly.

He blinked and looked away, deep in thoughts.

Could he do it? Could he be a dad again?

"Please," Eleven begged quietly.

So, he nodded.

"Of course, kiddo."

She smiled brightly and then looked back at the TV show. Hopper stared at her for a bit, with a soft expression and, surprisingly, no weight over his shoulders. He felt at peace.

He could do it. He could be a dad.

“So,” he started, turning his attention to the TV as well, “how is Mike?”

“He is great,” Eleven answered happily. “He is studying now. When can I go back to school?”

“We have to see what we can do,” he said. Eleven was a bit behind on her studies since her parents never took her to school. The records showed that she was still at a fourth-grade level. “Tomorrow I’ll go talk to the school, yes?”

She nodded excitedly and her enthusiasm was enough to warm Hopper’s heart.

And I'd break all the rules for you

Break my heart and start again

Eleven started going to school in February. She didn’t take as many classes as the other kids did, being advised to start with the basics: English, Maths and, as her choice, History. Mike was very excited to have her around during the breaks and lunch time.

Lucas snickered the first time he saw Mike watching Eleven get out of Hopper’s truck. The boy was enchanted, his eyes never leaving the girl who approached them. Will was also there, being enrolled in the school since the beginning of the year, but he remained quiet, more understanding of Mike and Eleven’s bond than the other boy. Dustin and Max weren’t there to see it, but they heard later on from Lucas’ mouth how in love Mike looks.

Mike gave him a death stare, which had Lucas laughing.

“Oh, man. You think your stares actually scare me? If you went back to being old, annoying Mike, that would scare me, not this,” Lucas joked, because now he was comfortable making jokes about Mike’s condition. It didn’t offend Mike that he did. This all situation had got to a point that, for Lucas, it was normal to have a friend who didn’t

talk. It was okay for Mike, who used to talk for hours non-stop, to be quiet all the time, except when he spoke to Eleven. Lucas had accepted that maybe they would never find out what happened to Mike and why his sudden muteness began when he was eight years old. What mattered was that he was being Mike again, even if there weren't as many words expressed as before.

"Who do you have next?" Max asked Eleven.

Max's screams had decreased throughout the years. She had finally come to understand that there were other ways to communicate with people and to grab their attention. Talking was a good way. Crying when she was hurt too. Laughing when she was happy. Being quiet when she was sad. Before, Max only knew how to scream. Now, she understood it was better, even for herself, to express her feelings through other ways.

"Uh," Eleven looked at the small paper in her hands. She had already had Maths with Mr. Clarke. "English. With... Mr. Carl Thomas."

"Oh, he's cool," Lucas said. "He was our teacher when we were in third grade, wasn't he, Mike?"

Mike just nodded.

"Do you want to take me there?" Eleven asked him hopefully. He had already taken her to the Maths classroom. It was exciting to walk inside this school side by side with Mike. It felt like the entire world knew they were friends and that idea made her extremely happy.

Mike kept staring at her, which was odd since he always responded to her.

"Mike?" Eleven frowned, worried.

Abruptly, he turned around and walked away. She looked at the rest of her friends, but none of them had an explanation for what had just happened. They all looked confused.

"I'll take you," Lucas offered, still looking down the corridor, to where his friend had gone. "Mr. Thomas's classroom hasn't changed, so I know where it is."

It turned out that there had been some sort of mistake and Mr. Thomas could not take Eleven into his class. It was already too full and he simply did not have a very much available schedule to tutor her outside classes. So, they went to the school secretariat and got Eleven a new English teacher, Mrs. Lee, who took her new student in with a warm welcoming.

“She’s funny,” Eleven told Mike as they waited for Mrs. Wheeler to come pick them up and take them to the hospital. “And very good at explaining.”

Mike nodded in agreement and remained quiet. Eleven touched his arm to grab his attention.

“What’s wrong?”

He shrugged.

“Mike.”

He looked at her.

Eleven’s kind brown eyes were sad and she seemed hesitant in talking.

“Are you mad?”

He shook his head.

“Then, why aren’t you talking?”

But Mike couldn’t do it. He couldn’t tell her what was wrong, so he looked away, ashamed, and waited in silence for his mother.

He had a session with the psychologist today, which didn’t help his mood at all since it was one hour he had to spend apart from Eleven. Joyce noticed right away that he wasn’t happy and asked him about it. He didn’t even look at her. She frowned.

“Mike, please, look at me.”

But he didn’t.

“Mike, come on.”

Finally, he looked up, upset.

“What’s wrong?” She asked him. He looked away. “Michael.” He looked back. “Did you and Eleven have a fight?”

He shook his head.

“Did you and Lucas?”

Another no.

“Did anything happen in your family?”

He hesitated, but said no.

“Why the hesitation?” Joyce asked next.

Mike huffed, frustrated, and his eyes turned to the clock on the office’s white wall. The psychologist noticed that, of course, and sighed. She stood up from the armchair she had been sitting on and went to move to the sofa where Mike was. She took the empty seat next to him.

“Mike, I need you to co-operate with me, please.”

He stared firmly at her. The boy had these solemn, brown eyes that carried too much seriousness for someone his age.

Finally, he spoke, “Can I go be with Eleven now, please?”

Joyce blinked.

“Mike, we need to have this session.”

“Please,” he begged. “Mrs. Byers, please.”

She blinked again, hesitant in giving him permission to go because she really wanted him to talk to her, to let her understand what was wrong and what was happening inside his head. This boy was the biggest challenge of her career since there was no actual, plausible explanation for his trauma. If there was even a trauma. No one knew

what had happened. All they knew was that Eleven's presence helped him get through the muteness.

Now looking at him, his small eyes begging her to let him go be with his friend, Joyce didn't have the strength to keep him in here. She finally nodded and allowed him to go.

"You're early," Eleven noticed as he sat down next to her at one of the small, round tables. She had been drawing something very abstract and Mike couldn't tell apart what was what.

"I asked Mrs. Byers to leave," he said.

"Why?"

"I wanted to be with you."

Eleven blinked and then looked down, blushing. In that moment, like it had happened more than once before, Mike wondered what exactly she felt towards him. Did her heart beat as fast as his did? Did she want his company as much as he wanted hers? Did she like the touch of his skin as much as he liked hers? Holding Eleven's hand was one of the most exciting things that had ever happened to Mike and he knew that feeling would never change.

He took a peek at the hand she had nearest him, which was laying on top of the table, holding the drawing down against the surface. He gulped and slowly placed his hand next to hers. Her small finger automatically found his.

Around them, there were kids talking loud and others running around, trying to catch each other, but Mike and Eleven didn't pay attention to them. They only saw each other, with red cheekbones and fast beating hearts.

Two days later, Mike Wheeler woke up with fever and his throat aching. His mother didn't let him go to school, nor to the hospital. He spent all day in bed, drinking tea and sleeping. Sometimes he would try and read something, but his head hurt too much and he couldn't concentrate.

At the hospital, in one of *Hawkins A.V. Club* sessions, Eleven was

feeling lonely, sitting in a corner with a book on her lap as the other kids around her played a board game all together. They had invited her to join in, but she had refused.

Max showed up halfway through the session. She now only needed to come twice a week and Mrs. Byers gave her the liberty to only come to half a session since she was now enrolled at the theatre club in school.

“You seem lonely,” the redhead girl stated as she sat down next to Eleven.

The other girl nodded.

“Mike isn’t here,” Max noticed.

“He’s sick.”

“Oh.” Then a snicker. “Well, then don’t go around kissing him, or you’ll get sick too.”

Eleven looked at her friend, confused.

“What? You two haven’t done it?”

Eleven shook her head.

“Well, I have,” Max confessed and Eleven’s eyes went wide-opened. “With Dustin,” the girl added. “It was nice.”

Eleven nodded, amazed, and then looked back at her book. Did she want to kiss Mike? She was only thirteen. Until last year, she hadn’t even known what a good hug was. Did she want to know what a good kiss was? No one had ever kissed her. Well, her mother did once, when she was six. But that was just to show her off to her co-workers. Her mother had had this obsession with the world having a good image of her. She always forgot that people weren’t blind, nor deaf, so they knew what she tried to hide at home. They just never cared enough to report them.

“How nice is it?” Eleven asked, curious.

Max thought for a bit.

“Well, Dustin was like... strawberries.”

Eleven frowned.

“Strawberries?”

“Yes, like... I really like strawberries. So, that’s how nice it was.”

“Oh.”

Eleven wondered how nice Mike’s kiss could be. Would it be like eggos? Or drawings? Or would it be like Mrs. Lee’s classes? Eleven liked all of those things and some more. She liked the nights that she got to spend with Hopper as much as she liked talking to Dustin and hearing him explain all these amazing fantasy stories. He was currently writing his own story about this girl with superpower. She liked that too.

Eleven suddenly frowned. Above all those things, she liked Mike the best. So, the question remained: how nice could his kiss be? And did she want to try it?

Hopper came to pick her up around six pm. He talked with Joyce for a while, outside the truck, away from Eleven’s ears. While she waited patiently, she played with the edge of her blue skirt. Under it, she had put on these black knee socks, which she kept pulling up since they were too big for her skinny legs. All her siblings had this obsession with covering themselves up. It had been their way of coping. If they couldn’t see how scarred their skins were, then it wasn’t true.

She wondered how they all were. She sometimes talked to some of them on the telephone, but the conversations were short and quiet. Ten and Nine, who were now fifteen years old, were living with this old lady who home-schooled them and treated them like they were babies. Funnily, they liked her. She had probably become their official guardian by now. The oldest of them all was Carla, known in the family as Number One, and she was probably twenty-two by now. After her father was arrested, she simply left town with Two (Marco),

the oldest boy in the family. He was probably twenty by now.

The Ives siblings didn't share any kind of feelings towards each other. Twelve years that Eleven had spent with them, yet all they had felt was this self-survival instinct about themselves. They weren't those kind of beautiful stories, in which the kids joined together to defeat the bad father, or the ignorant mother. No, they just cared about themselves.

Eleven bit her lip, seeing Hopper going over the truck and then opening the driver's door and getting in the truck. He took one look at her and sighed.

"What is it?"

"I want to go see Mike," she asked.

He took a deep breath and nodded. "Of course you want. Fine, let's go see the kid."

Hopper stayed with Karen in the kitchen, drinking a cup of coffee, while Eleven skipped her way up the stairs and into Mike's room. He was half-asleep when she got in. so, she went quietly until the edge of his bed and tried not to bother him as she sat down on top of his green bedspread. He gave her a small smile and rubbed one of his eyes.

"Are you feeling okay?" She asked him.

He shrugged. His face was red and his black hair was sticking to his forehead. He had probably sweated a lot during the day.

"Been worse," he said in a croaky voice and coughed. "Don't come too near me. You can get sick too."

She shook her head. "I don't mind."

Her hand found his and their finger intertwined together. He was much warmer than her, so she took her other hand and placed it on top of their joined hands. He coughed again.

"You're a bit cold," he commented.

"It's cold outside," she explained.

He nodded, understanding, and closed his eyes for a moment before opening them again and looking at her.

The first time Eleven had seen Mike Wheeler, she felt something she had never felt in her short life: safety. He had sat down next to her on those round tables at the group therapy, and showed her these pieces of paper and pencils. He had drawn with her, something that no one had ever done. And he had got interested in her and who she was. And he had also been kind. He still was.

Eleven's mind went back to the talk she had with Max. She took a deep breath, nervous, and shyly asked, "Have you ever kissed anyone?"

Mike blinked, surprised.

"No," he answered, to Eleven's relief. "Why?"

She shrugged, trying to play it cool, but her heart was beating fast and she felt this nervous little bug making its way over the tips of her fingers, which were touching Mike's warm skin.

"I... I was wondering what it felt like, kissing someone," she confessed.

Mike blinked again.

"And who..." He shut himself up and looked away.

But Eleven answered him anyways. "You."

He looked back at her, his face redder than before.

"Really?"

She nodded shyly.

Clumsy, Mike tried to sit up and Eleven had to help him not to fall over their intertwined hands. He gave her a nervous smile and she giggled softly.

"And.. I..." He looked around, confused. He had wondered as well, what would be like to kiss her, but it made him so happy to just hold her hand that it never occurred to him that, maybe, just maybe, she could want more than that. "Really?" He repeated.

Eleven bit her bottom lip shyly and nodded. His gaze went down to her lips and then back to her eyes.

"But you can get sick," he remembered suddenly.

"I don't mind," she reminded him with a soft smile and squeezed his hand.

Mike nodded, amazed that this was actually going to happen, and then moved his head a bit in her direction. He waited until she closed even more the distance between them. Suddenly, their noses were touching. Then, their eyes closed, their heart beat faster than ever and their lips touched.

Eleven realized that Mike's kiss was the nicest even before it was finished.

When they pulled back, Mike looked at her, worried and afraid of what her thoughts could be.

But Eleven smiled and said, "It tastes like you."

Mike blinked.

"W-what?"

"Your kiss. It's nice. Because it tastes like you."

Mike still didn't fully understand her words, but his mouth broke into a huge smile and his face turned into a very dark red.

He never felt happier.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you for reading. Please tell me what you think. It's a very dark AU that I'm writing here. I hope you guys are enjoying it.

4. Part 4

But I'm only human

And I bleed when I fall down

For Mike's fourteenth birthday, Karen prepared this huge party to which he only invited five guests: Eleven, Lucas, Will, Dustin and Max. Of course, Nancy was there as well, and she had asked her friend Barb to come along, since she didn't want to be the only teenager around a bunch of children.

"We are all teenagers too," Lucas said after she had made a remark about how they were all annoying kids. "Max is the youngest and she's thirteen. You become a teenager at the age of thirteen. Everyone knows that." He had a smirk on his face, proud of his answer.

"But I'll be fourteen soon!" Max suddenly exclaimed before taking a huge bite from a piece of chocolate cake.

"Yeah, in ten months," Dustin joked. She slapped his arm playfully.

There was this very long table decorated with a green tablecloth, which had dozens of plates of cakes, cookies, candies and chips. Nancy had warned her mother that this was too much for just six kids, but Karen kept on baking and buying more things. This was the first time in six years that her son was asking for a birthday party. She was going to make it memorable.

"Is Steve coming?" Karen asked her older daughter as she walked out of the house with two bowls of gummy bears and found her wandering around the food table.

Nancy gave her an annoyed stare.

"I broke up with him."

Nancy Wheeler had broken up with Steve Harrington around six

times now. But every after break-up, something happened and she changed her mind, because, stupid her, who told her to mess around with a boy that had trust issues that big? In one of the times, he had literally sent her a bouquet of roses every god damn day until she was forced by her own guilty conscience to take him back.

But this time... This time had been for real. Nancy couldn't deal with him anymore. He was a good guy, honestly, he was, but she had got tired of him two years ago, and that feeling had only got worse with time.

"Oh, that's sad." Karen Wheeler couldn't hide the unconcern in her tone of voice since she wasn't surprised about the outcome of her daughter's last date with her boyfriend, nor was she worried that she was hurting. Because it had been two years and Nancy had yet managed to break up for real with Steve.

"I'm not going back this time," Nancy said.

"Good for you, dear," Karen replied and went back into the house to fetch the drinks.

Nancy huffed as Barb approached.

"Your brother is cute,-"

"Oh, God, Barb, he's too young for you," Nancy interrupted with a shocked face.

Barb rolled her eyes.

"Can you let me finish?" Nancy looked at her quietly. "He's cute when he's with his girlfriend."

Nancy looked over to where the kids were, standing by a tree, while trying to decide which game they were going to play. Mike was staying closely to Eleven and they were holding each other's hands.

"I don't think they are dating," Nancy stated.

Barb snorted.

"I didn't say that either, but after all these years, she has to be his girlfriend even if she isn't. Anyways, I'm going to see if your mom needs help." And she walked inside the house.

Nancy stayed still, thinking about her friend's words and how her young brother behaved so strangely around that girl. Well, around Eleven. Nancy and she had shared a few words over the years. She was a nice girl, very polite and very, very shy. Nancy had never asked her mother what was the deal with the girl, but she knew she had come from a rough childhood. She had this burn scar on the back of her hair that caught a bit of her hairline and prevented that small area from growing more hair. Since she had first become friends with her brother, Eleven's hair had grown into a pixie cut and anyone could see that the girl was more comfortable with herself now.

The kids broke apart and Will stayed behind at the tree, leaning against it and covering his eyes. Suddenly, he started counting very loudly. The other kids were snickering as they ran around, trying to find a place to hide. Except Mike. Mike approached the table and decided to grab a chocolate cookie.

"Aren't you going to play?" Nancy asked him.

Their mother joined them at moment with two bottles of orange and pineapple juice.

Mike shook his head.

"Why not?" Nancy asked.

He shrugged and moved away from the table with two more cookies in his hands.

Nancy sighed.

It was so frustrating when her brother had bad days, or bad moments like this one, where he would go back to his muteness and refused to acknowledge other people's input. She had once got really infuriated with him and had shouted at him because *now we know you can and want to talk, so fuckin' talk, Mike*. Her mother had lost her mind because Mike locked himself in his bedroom and only came out

when Eleven was brought by the chief.

Four years in therapy and yet no one knew why Mike acted like this. That thought bothered Nancy some days. She was used to him like this, having good days where he talked back and was actually a kid, and then other days where you wouldn't even feel his presence because he was so quiet and static. But she got used to this all situation because of time, not because she understood. And no one understood. It had been almost six years since he first stopped talking. Six years without a good explanation.

Will Byers left his place by the tree and started looking around with a serious expression on his face.

The first person he found was Lucas, who was hiding behind another tree. They both ran as fast as they could to the tree, and Will managed to get there first, so Lucas was out. Mike was sitting on one of the chairs that they had placed around the backyard and, while he watched his friends play, he ate his cookies with an amused look.

The last one to be found was Eleven. She came out of the basement with a victory look after Lucas had shouted that she had won and could show up.

"Honestly, that isn't fair," Will complained. "I didn't think the basement counted!"

"We never said it didn't," Dustin commented.

"Yeah, I can see that now," Will replied sarcastically.

"Come on, El, it's your turn," Lucas said.

But the girl shook her head.

"Let's play another game," she requested.

The kids frowned.

"So that Mike can play," she added. When the rest agreed, she turned around and went to grab Mike from his chair.

In the middle of the afternoon, Karen joined all kids around the table to sing happy birthday to Mike. Holly demanded to be in front of the cake to blow the candles with her big brother.

As they sang happy birthday, Karen looked around and lost her smile. Her husband had deliberately scheduled a reunion for this day in order not to be around his son on his birthday. That sudden reminder made her want to cry, because all she wanted was to have her family all together and happy. Everything was finally going back to normal. Well, as normal as it could be. But her husband wasn't playing along with it. He kept acting coldly towards his son and, even worse, to Eleven, who had actually helped Mike. Why did Ted have to act like this?

Karen looked at her son again, who was smiling as his friends sang and clapped their hands, and she tried to push over the tears and be content. At least, her boy was better.

After eating the birthday cake, it was time for presents. All the kids had joined together and bought Mike this really cool collection of comic books. Karen had bought him a new jacket and a pair of sneakers that she knew he had wanted since, one morning, when she came into his bedroom, and there had been a magazine open on his bedside table and the black sneakers' picture was staring at her, as a silent request from her son.

To her surprise, Nancy had also got something for her brother: a small white board and a black marker pen.

"And, see, you can hang it," she said, pointing at the thin string on top of the board. "Since, well, you know, you're fourteen now and I honestly do not want to go into your bedroom when you're doing funny business, so... just hang that on the door."

Most kids laughed, but Mike just blushed deeply, embarrassed, as Eleven looked away and tried to put a smile. It wasn't like they had anything to hide, but the girl knew that Nancy's comment was to her as well because she and Mike spent a lot of time together in his bedroom. But they only ever did their homework, talked to each other or drew together. They were content with just that.

Karen Wheeler blinked, suddenly hit by the realization that her son was indeed a fourteen-year-old boy and he had *begged* her for an entire week to let Eleven sleep there tonight. Did she do wrong in allowing that sleepover?

So, Karen pulled her daughter aside and confided in her these worries. Nancy laughed.

“Mom, it was a joke. And, after all, they have had a gazillion sleepovers and everything has gone well, right?”

It wasn’t like Nancy trusted fourteen-year-old boys. She knew how they were. But her young brother wasn’t at all like that. And it wasn’t her big sister’s trust talking, it was a fact. All you had to do was look at her brother and Eleven interacting and you would just know that there were no second intentions going on. It was all too pure.

Around seven pm, parents started showing up to pick their kids. Hopper appeared as well, to drop off a bag for Eleven, and have a small chat with her. Since March 1985 that she was known as Jane Ives Hopper. She had wanted to keep her last name, since that was who she was, but she had asked for Hopper’s last name as well since he was her new family. He was legally her new guardian and father. It was weird, but, so far, everything had gone well. And Joyce had given him a few advices on how to be a father to a teenage girl.

“You behave well, okay?” He asked her, crouched in front of her, so they could be face to face.

Eleven nodded happily and threw her arms around him.

After the initial shock passed, Hopper hugged her back.

It had taken a long time to Eleven actually starting to understand that people around her wouldn’t touch her to hurt her. She had understood that right away with Mike, but the rest had had to wait.

Jim Hopper only got his first hug on the day they signed her adoption papers.

Joyce Byers had got one after she told the girl that she only needed to come twice a week to the group therapy and have one private

session with her once in two weeks. Joyce had got her second hug from Eleven the day she told Mike Wheeler that he also only needed to come twice a week.

Karen Wheeler had got her Eleven's first hug around two months ago, when the girl shyly asked her if there was any chance they could go to this store where she had seen this very cute dress. Hopper had left money with her, she just needed the ride. So, Karen accepted it and, in return, received a hug.

"She's good, she's very good," Joyce had confided in Hopper one afternoon, when he came to pick Eleven up. "And she'll keep on getting better thanks to you too."

Ted Wheeler didn't show up for dinner, so Karen didn't bother cooking. Instead, she ordered pizza and allowed her kids and Eleven to eat in front of the TV.

After the film they had been watching ended, Karen took her sleeping youngest daughter upstairs, leaving a warning behind to the others that it was time for bed.

Mike and Eleven brushed their teeth together in front of the bathroom's mirror and then, he waited outside his bedroom as she changed to her pyjamas. Nancy saw him there and snorted.

"What a gentleman."

Mike made a face which had her laugh.

Then, when Eleven was ready, they switched places. He got dressed very fast and opened the door to let her in.

His bed was ready for both of them, having two pillows set side by side.

Leaving the door open, since his mother had demanded that, they got into bed and Mike turned off the bedside table lamp.

They waited quietly as there was still light from the corridor and people moving. They waited, staring at each other with soft smiles and holding each other's hands under the sheets as if it were their

most precious secret.

Finally, the lights in the corridor disappeared and Karen's bedroom door closed.

Mike's heart suddenly skipped a beat, knowing he was finally alone with Eleven.

She whispered, "Birthday present?"

He nodded eagerly and Eleven closed the distance between their bodies. Her nose touched his, stroke it a bit, before she kissed him softly. Just a small touch of the lips. Once. And then twice.

Mike and Eleven barely kissed each other. It wasn't a thing that they had the need to do every day, all the time, unlike Max and Dustin who were always being caught kissing and had already had to hear the mythical and embarrassing "talk" about five times now. No, Mike and Eleven weren't like that. They'd rather hold each other's hands and spend time alone together.

But today was different. It was Mike's birthday. So, after Eleven pulled back for the second time, he went in for one more time.

She smiled.

"You're cheeky," she joked, hiding her face against his chest.

"It's my birthday," he replied. "And in three months, it will be yours."

That had Eleven giggle.

"Can't wait."

Mike wrapped an arm around her and his hand stroke her back gently.

When Mike Wheeler first heard his older sister crying because of a boy, she had been thirteen and he, nine. At that time, he had thought first loves were silly. And, according to his mother, *you'll forget him soon because that's how first love works*. Maybe she had confused 'love'

and ‘crush’, but either way, Mike had taken that phrase as something true. Like, his mother should know what she was talking about. She had been through that and much more.

Today, Mike Wheeler wasn’t sure if he was experiencing first love correctly. If he was, then his mother hadn’t said the right thing, because he didn’t forget Eleven soon. No, she was still in his mind all the time, and every second with her was a bliss.

Moreover, if this was really first love, then Mike didn’t want to know what other loves would be like, because this one was already too intense. This one already felt like it was forever.

Suddenly, a loud, long sound echoed through the walls of the house. Mike and Eleven sat up, frowning. The sound kept going.

“It’s a song,” Eleven realized.

And then a terrible meowing from a desperate cat was heard. Angry steps followed, then a door opening and the corridor’s light was turned on.

The kids got out of bed and walked out of the room just in time to see Nancy climbing down the stairs. They followed her.

Nancy Wheeler opened the door of her house to find Steve Harrington in her front yard, calling out her name like a desperate cat being hurt, while his car poured out loud, sad music for everyone in the neighbourhood to hear.

“What the hell? Steve, turn that off!” Nancy screamed as she walked up to him.

Steve tried to hug her, but she pulled back. At the door, Mike and Eleven were staring at them wide-opened. Eleven’s hand found Mike’s, scared.

“Please, Nancy, please,” Steve begged.

“You’re being ridiculous. Turn that music down!” She exclaimed and looked behind her shoulder, afraid that her mother would wake up. But she ended up seeing Mike and Eleven. “Go back to your room!”

She screamed at them, but the kids didn't move.

She tried to go to them, but Steve followed her and she pushed him back.

"Turn the goddamn music off!"

So, he did and then he followed her to where she was going.

"You two should be in bed," she told them in an infuriated tone of voice.

Mike and Eleven stared at her.

"Ohh," Steve let out a pain sound as he noticed the two fourteen-year-olds holding hands. "I can't believe that even two kids are happier than us, Nancy!"

Nancy hit him in the arm.

"Don't you say that shit!"

She was about to turn to her brother and tell him to go to bed, when he did just that before she could even speak. He took Eleven by the hand away from the door and Nancy made sure they walked upstairs before turning back to Steve and hit him one more time.

"We've talked about this, Steve!"

"I want you back, Nancy!" He exclaimed.

"No, you don't!" She screamed. "You want a mother!"

Steve froze, staring at her in shock as tears fell down. Nancy regretted the words as soon as they left her mouth.

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

Steve tried to clean his tears away, shaking his head.

"Doesn't matter if you are sorry. It's still true," he mumbled back and sobbed quietly. "I'm sorry."

Nancy sighed.

"I want to be your friend, Steve. I really do. I just... I don't want a boyfriend. And you've forced yourself to be just that..."

Steve took a deep breath and nodded, understanding.

"Fine, I get it. I'll go home. I'm sorry to have come here." He turned around and started walking to his car.

Nancy noticed how his shoulders were shaking a bit. He was in no condition to drive home.

"Steve," she called. He looked back, hopefully. Nancy sighed. "You can sleep on the sofa."

"Oh, there's no—"

"I'm not asking a second time," she interrupted him dryly.

Steve nodded, went to his car to lock it up and then came back.

Nancy pointed at the couch in the living-room and told him to wait a minute. She went to the basement to grab a few blankets.

"Don't you dare going upstairs," she warned him as she passed him the blankets. "And I mean it, Steve. You bother me during the night and we won't even stay friends."

He nodded frenetically.

Without saying good night, Nancy went back upstairs. She passed her brother's open door and checked on them. But she only saw Eleven laying on the bed.

The bathroom's door grinded as it was opened and she turned around. Mike's face had a few wet spots where he had been reckless cleaning with a towel.

"Are you okay?" She asked him. He was looking a bit pale.

But Mike didn't reply. He simply walked back into his bedroom and

climbed to his bed, taking his place next to Eleven.

Nancy controlled the anger inside of her, knowing very well that she was mad at Steve, and not her brother. Besides, she had no right to scream at her brother for not answering her. She was used to it.

Your eyes, they shine so bright

I wanna save that light

Hawkins' Downtown News newspaper called Joyce Byers and asked for an interview with her about her group therapy for kids. They wanted to do a full article about her work with the town's children, plus having a small chat with the very first patients she had had the pleasure to work with.

"They aren't patients," Joyce corrected the interviewer, a woman in her late forties, blonde and with round glasses. "They are children."

"Yes, but as children in here, they..."

"No, I never treat them like that," Joyce replied, shaking her head. Then, she smiled softly. "You understand that it's very hard to anyone to admit that they might have some kind of trauma, or... issue... Even for adults, it's hard to admit. Not one of us in this room would deliberately say 'Yes, I need help'. So, you can imagine how harder it is for children to face that about themselves... The work here is to help them get better without shocking them with that confession. I try to help them realize for themselves that something was wrong, but they have got better and they'll keep getting better."

There was a sudden flash from the photographer's camera. Joyce blinked, surprised, and then smiled at him.

"My older son loves taking pictures as well," she commented.

The photographer chuckled.

“Is he good?”

Joyce nodded proudly.

“Yes. Right now, he’s taking a photography course in New York.”

“And you let him live there all alone?” The interviewer asked her, frowning.

Joyce kept on smiling.

“My Jonathan is a very responsible boy who has his goals very well set. He’s actually coming home in a few weeks.”

Jonathan Byers had grown up too fast, being a huge support for his mother as she went through the entire process of divorcing her terrible ex-husband at the same time as he was the perfect old brother for Will, who couldn’t deal with loud people or crowded places. After everything had passed, and Will was better and Joyce had found a new goal for her life, Jonathan had asked his mother to allow him to take intensive courses all over the country. He had been very young, yes, but he knew what he wanted and made sure his mother was aware of every detail of every course he planned to take. He was a happy young man now and that made her a satisfied mother.

Soon, the journalist asked her to interview some of the kids. They started with Joyce’s son, Will, who explained that his experience in Bloomington Hospital had helped him a lot, as well as his mother’s support throughout the entire process.

“I felt so suffocated,” Will explained. “Crowded places... I... I didn’t like them. And knowing that... that I was like that, it scared me. It made me worse because I knew it wasn’t... it wasn’t okay and... the group therapy, it made me better. And I’m really happy.”

Then, they interviewed Max Winters.

“Basically, I screamed a lot,” she concluded. “Now I see there’s no point in screaming.” And smiled happily.

Dustin Henderson gave a long interview about what had happened to

him, explaining also his rare teeth and bone disorder to the journalist.

“It’s spelled C-l-e-i-d-o-c-r-a-n-i-a-l and then, d-y-s-p-l-a-s-i-a. You should research it and do an article about it. People should know more about it.” He smiled happily at the camera as the photographer took his picture.

They also interviewed Tommy, the boy who used to bite himself, and Mary, a girl who used to stutter a lot.

Finally, Joyce brought Mike and Eleven into the office. They sat down on their usual sofa, side by side, their hands touching shyly between their bodies. The journalist noticed and smiled.

“Oh, first love?”

They blushed.

“Let’s talk about that!” The journalist exclaimed happily.

Both kids looked at her, confused.

Joyce decided to intervene.

“They are very quiet kids.”

The journalist’s expression fell.

“Okay, then... let’s talk about what brought you to this group therapy.”

Joyce had to answer many times for Mike and Eleven. She explained that when Mike first came to her, he didn’t talk at all and it took him a while to start making progresses, but was now in a very good path. Eleven was a very quiet girl and had had a rough childhood that she was now overcoming as well.

“Why do you think their progress is so slow?” The journalist asked out of the blue, while the photographer tried to take the perfect picture of the kids.

Both Mike and Eleven blinked because of the flash, confused and not enjoying this interview at all.

Joyce made a face.

“It’s different for everyone. But they are doing well now. Mike, for instance, just needed a small push.”

“And what was that ‘small push?’” The journalist wondered, curious.

Joyce looked at the kids, who were still blinking because of the camera’s flash that didn’t stop attacking their eyes.

The journalist motioned with her hand for the photographer to stop for a minute. The kids recovered their vision and looked at her, confused.

“What was the ‘small push’ for you guys to, you know, start getting better?” she asked them.

Mike and Eleven looked at each other and that was enough of an answer for the journalist that smiled and took down a note in her small sketchbook. At that moment, the camera’s flash was heard and another picture was taken.

On Monday’s edition of the Downtown News newspaper, the front page had a picture of Eleven and Mike looking at each other, sitting on a sofa, with their hands touching each other shyly between them. On top of it, you could read YOUNG LOVE IN HAWKINS GROUP THERAPY.

Notes for the Chapter:

I hope you are enjoying this story.

5. Part 5

Take a look in the mirror

And what do you see

Do you see it clearer

Or are you deceived

Nancy Wheeler was finally allowing Steve Harrington to come around and actually be friends with her. It had taken a while, two months to be precise, for him to, one, finally accept that they would never become a couple again and, two, that Nancy had never said that she would abandon him after the break-up. She had been honest when she had told him they could still be friends as long as he felt the same.

“They are cute,” Steve said, taking a glimpse at that week’s edition of Downtown News. Nancy had been reading the article about Joyce Byers’ work with traumatized kids and there were pictures of Mike and Eleven together. They were the front page, actually. “How long have they been dating?”

“They aren’t dating,” Nancy replied before folding the newspaper into two and dropping it on the canteen’s white table. It was lunch time and Barb had shown up with the newspaper and a smirk on her face. “And I can’t believe that stupid journalist is using two kids as bait for readers. Honestly.”

“I think it’s cute too,” Barb commented, finishing her chocolate pudding. “I mean, Mrs. Byers has worked hard on Mike and Eleven’s cases, so... them having the prominence in the article doesn’t take away her good work. It just adds a certain sweetness.”

“It doesn’t need sweetness,” Nancy said, rubbing her neck. She had worked all weekend at Benny’s diner. Waking up this morning had been a nightmare. “It needs reality. People need to understand that

these kids have already lived through nightmares.”

“And got better. Thanks to Mrs. Byers’ group therapy,” Steve added. When Nancy agreed, he looked pleased with himself.

“Yes, and your brother should try it too.” Barb threw Steve a glance.

He frowned.

“Troy?”

“Yes. Hasn’t he been advised by the school’s board to join the group therapy. Mrs. Byers has his name there. Why hasn’t he joined?”

Steve looked shocked. Clearly, he hadn’t known about his brother’s situation.

“I... I’m going to talk to my dad when I get home,” he mumbled.

For the rest of the day, Steve was uncharacteristically quiet, jumping from sad pouts to worried frowns. He cared a lot about his younger brother, but their ways of coping after their mother’s disappearance had drifted them apart.

When Nancy got home that day from school, she showed Mike, who was watching cartoons while doing his homework, the newspaper. He took one look at it, blushed upon seeing his picture with Eleven, and threw it on the floor.

“How do you feel about being front page?” His sister asked teasingly.

“Bad.”

Nancy’s amused expression transformed into a frown.

“Bad? Why?”

“Lucy Harrington was front page too,” he muttered as he grabbed his eraser and rubbed something out in his homework.

Nancy blinked, surprised to hear him say that. To be honest, she wouldn’t have even thought that her brother was aware of who Lucy

Harrington was and what had happened to her. For the past years, he always seemed so emerged in his quiet world that it didn't look like he was paying attention to what was around him.

"Oh, that's..." She didn't know how to react.

Mike kept on doing his homework quietly and she eventually left to go to her bedroom.

The newspaper was forgotten on the floor, even after Mike grabbed his books and left the living-room, even after Holly played around with her dolls on the floor. Only later, when Ted Wheeler came after work, tired and ready for a small nap in his La-Z-Boy recliner that the newspaper was remembered again. Frowning, he picked it up, saw the front page's picture and called out for his wife.

Karen showed up, cleaning her hands with an old cloth, and with a bit of flour on her cheeks. Ted lifted the newspaper for her to see the picture of their kid and that girl.

"Yes, I've seen it," she said dryly.

"This is ridiculous."

Karen sighed.

"It's just an article, Ted. Let them do their job. It doesn't say anything bad about Mike."

"It talks about the group therapy!" Ted exclaimed loudly.

Karen's eyes went wide-opened as she realized what her husband was worried about.

"You... You—" She shut herself up for a second, controlling her anger. "Everyone already knew that Mike went to therapy, Ted."

"Not everyone," he remarked.

"I'm pretty sure that everyone—"

"Not my co-workers!" Ted shouted.

Karen stared at him, astonished.

“Have...Have...” She looked around, as if she was suddenly lost in an unknown place. “Have you been hiding your son from your co-workers all these years?”

Ted didn’t reply.

“Are... Are you that ashamed?” She asked him. But her husband remained quiet. “Ted, just answer me!”

“Yes!” Ted confessed. “Yes, I am.”

Karen closed her mouth and gave her husband one of the angriest looks she had ever given him.

“You piece of shit.”

“W-what?”

“You’re a piece of shit, Ted,” Karen repeated before turning around and leaving the living-room. The moment she found herself alone in the kitchen, she cried two silent tears and let out a sob.

How could her husband be such an asshole?

Their son was theirs, no matter what he was going through, no matter what other people thought of him. But no, Ted had to be an asshole. Ted had always been too proud of him and his goddamn, stupid work that kept him away from the home for weeks straight if necessary. Why couldn’t he put his pride aside and be a father? Mike needed one, more than he was needing a mother, or a sister. Yet here they were, living all under the same roof and Mike had no father to care about him.

Karen suddenly let out a sad chuckle as she cleaned the flour on her face. She barely had a husband. How could she ask for a father to her children?

Maybe we have made her blind

So she tries to cover up her pain and cuddle woes away

It was a warm Sunday afternoon. Nancy was working at Benny's diner. Ted was away on a business trip and Karen had taken little Holly to a playdate at a neighbour's house. Mike stayed home, studying with Lucas and Eleven. Well, trying to study as Lucas went on about how incredible Dustin's birthday was going to be since he was doing a themed-party. Dustin was the second youngest of the group, right before Max, who was the baby of the group since her birthday was so apart from the rest of them, and after Will, whose birthday had been celebrated one month ago, along with Eleven's.

"He doesn't want to say what the theme is, but I'm sure it's going to be Star Wars. I mean, what else can it be?"

"The Hobbit," Mike suggested.

"Ghostbusters," Eleven added.

Lucas stared at them, not amused.

"It's true," Mike said.

"Ah-ha, right." Lucas looked at the kitchen's clock. "Shit, I've got to go home." He started packing his books.

"Why?" Mike asked, curious, as he took a glance of the time. It was only four pm.

"Mom wants to go I-don't-know-where and I need to babysit my sister."

After everything was inside his backpack, Lucas put it over his shoulders and smiled teasingly at both Mike and Eleven.

"Don't do anything naughty," he joked.

Mike and Eleven looked at each other, at first confused, and then blushing. Lucas laughed and walked out of the kitchen. Soon, a door opened and then closed. They were alone.

And, like always, Mike's heart beating increased. His hands felt sweaty now that no one was there between him and Eleven. He glanced at her, shyly, and noticed she was looking his way as well. They smiled and turned their eyes to the homework in front of them.

"Do you think we can take a break?" Eleven asked reservedly.

Mike nodded, blushing, and they left their books on the table, opting to go upstairs to his bedroom.

Mike closed the door, something that he didn't remember doing in years, since his mother or his sister were always there supervising them.

Eleven sat on his bed, crossing her legs in front of her, and Mike soon joined her, copying her position. They stared at each other for a few seconds, their hands securely placed on their laps, yet craving to go and touch each other.

Their eyes met and they smiled. Then, they looked away, still smiling, wondering what to do, or what to say. It wasn't like they felt the need to talk to each other. Silence was good. They knew how to communicate with glances and facial expressions. But this moment... it felt like it needed more than just comfortable silence.

Finally, Eleven decided to lay down. Mike watched her closely, as she crawled her way up the bed and laid her head on the pillow. She then patted the empty spot near her. Blushing, Mike moved his body up and laid down on his side. Their eyes met. Their hands joined together between their bodies. They smiled again.

"What do you think first love is like?" Mike asked her out of the blue.

Eleven blinked, surprised. Her fingers squeezed his.

"I... I don't know. Why?"

"My mom said once that first love is easily forgotten," Mike told her. His voice was a bit shaky, so he cleared his throat. "I don't know."

Eleven looked at him, curious.

“You don’t know what?”

Her thumb started stroking the back of his hand. Mike took a deep breath, absorbed by the touch and how it made his skin warm.

“Mike?”

His eyes found hers.

“I don’t know if she was right, or I’m... Am I wrong? Are we wrong, El?”

Eleven blinked.

“Wrong in what?”

Mike moved their joined hands as an answer. Eleven frowned.

“Do you think this is wrong?”

Her question and the uncertainty of her voice made Mike shake his head frenetically. He pulled their hands closer to his body.

“Then, why ask that?” Eleven wondered.

“I... I don’t know,” he confessed. “I was just thinking about it...”

Eleven smiled softly.

“Sometimes you think too much, Mike,” she teased.

He shrugged one shoulder.

“Well, that’s all I’ve done in the past years.”

“I never had time for that,” Eleven admitted, looking away. “Always too scared to take the time to think...To relax.”

Mike squeezed her hand. She looked up at him and blinked. Her eyes were filled with an unexpected idea.

“Do you want to see?” She asked him.

Mike frowned.

“See what?”

“My scars,” she answered, her eyes darting away from his.

He blinked a few times, surprised.

“Ah... I...” In the end, when words refused to come out, he nodded.

Eleven got out of the bed and Mike sat up, confused. He watched her take off her white sneakers and place them carefully by the bed’s side. Then, she started unbuttoning her jeans. Mike’s eyes went wide-opened.

“El-“

Her jeans dropped to the floor.

“El-“ He tried again, but Eleven wasn’t listening. She was now taking one of her sweater’s sleeves off. Then, she took the other one and pulled the sweatshirt through her head.

Eleven was standing in his bedroom in her socks, underwear and a plain, white top.

Mike blinked, not knowing where to look. But then he saw it, a big, red and swollen scar on her left thigh. It had a weird-looking pattern, almost looking like a broken star.

Eleven returned to the bed, sitting in front of Mike. She pointed to the scar he had just seen.

“My dad pushed me through the backyard’s door. It was made of glass.”

Mike was staring at it, astonished with the information. His eyes moved from her left thigh to her right one. There were many small, round transparent, yet brownish scars. Cigarette marks, just like the ones on her arms.

“He never had a place to put out his cigarette,” Eleven said as one of

her fingers traced the small scars. Then, they moved to her knee. It had three small, deep white lines going down to her leg. “He bought a new knife and wanted to try it on.”

“W-what?” Mike’s voice broke as he stared at the scars, shocked. More than shocked. There was no way to express how... how revolted, miserable and upset he was over what Eleven was telling him. They weren’t just stories. This was her past. Scarred in her body.

Eleven turned her body and showed her left shoulder, where more than five white scars could be seen. Where her dad had tried out his knife.

Miked pointed at them, confused and shocked. Eleven forced a small smile.

“Some of my siblings have them too...”

She sighed and moved her body, taking Mike’s view away from her shoulder.

She then rose her top, allowing Mike to see her stomach. The scar she had by her bellybutton looked like a worm. An ugly and fat worm. Mike’s hand moved slowly until his finger almost touched the scar. He looked at Eleven, who nodded slightly. He touched it, caressed it from one side to the other. It was soft. Softer than her skin.

“The back is the worse part,” she suddenly confessed, ashamed.

Mike blinked, and pulled his hand away. Eleven covered herself, keeping her eyes away from his face as her arms wrapped themselves around her torso. She was afraid. Mike didn’t want her to feel that. He leaned over and touched her knee, caressing her scars.

“It’s okay,” he said.

“I’m scared,” she mumbled. “Of what you’ll think of me.”

Mike shook his head and his fingers stopped still on her knee.

Eleven looked at him, still a bit afraid. Mike nodded, encouragingly. Like saying not to worry, he wouldn’t change his mind about her. Finally, she nodded back and turned around on the bed. Her back

was now to him, covered by the white top. Mike could see some marks already popping out by her shoulders blades.

“You can lift it up,” she allowed.

With shaking hands, which Mike tried to control before they touched Eleven’s top, he lifted the only barrier between his eyes and her most dreadful scars.

They were huge, covering most of her back. Some were darker than the others, marking her up in all kinds of directions. They were seatbelt’s scars. He was sure before she even had to tell him anything. Carefully, Mike touched one that began near her underwear and crossed over her spine. The end was still covered by the top. He felt how roughened it made her skin.

Eleven trembled.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered.

She looked over her shoulder.

“It doesn’t hurt.”

But it had hurt, Mike thought. It had hurt her plenty. And it still hurt her. Maybe not physically, but emotionally. She was scared and disgusted by her own body.

Mike pulled the top down and Eleven turned to him again. She tried to smile, but it came out as a scared expression. She was looking at him in a way that he never wanted her to look, or feel.

“You’re pretty.”

Eleven shook her head.

“You are.”

“They are ugly.”

“They aren’t you,” Mike replied.

Eleven half-smiled sadly.

"First love talking," she joked.

Mike couldn't control a real soft chuckle leaving his mouth. He shook his head.

"Promise talking," he corrected her.

'Promise' had been one of the first words they shared. Mike had used it to promise Eleven that he would be there, in the group therapy, with her. She had frowned, confused, and had said, "Promises are broken." And he had shaken his head and replied, "Not this one."

Not their promise. Not their bond. Not their feelings.

It had been two years since they met. Two years since Mike talked again, in a warm day of May, upon meeting the shaved-headed girl that had joined the group therapy. He never quite understood what drove him to her. He had just known, at that moment, that he wanted to be near her. All the time. And he had been, and still was, lucky because she had felt the same. She had trusted him, the boy who could speak but didn't do it.

They were both broken, in different, yet similar ways.

Mike noticed how Eleven was looking down at her legs sadly. How the scars really hurt her and made her see herself in a way that wasn't close to reality. They didn't define her.

He suddenly held one finger up, as if asking her to wait, and left the bed. He went to this desk and started opening drawers until he found what he wanted. The black marker pen that Nancy had given him for his birthday.

He returned to the bed and sat down next to Eleven, instead of being in front of her. She looked at him confused and he, hesitantly, opened the marker pen and pointed to her tight.

She understood what he wanted and nodded.

Carefully, Mike touched her soft tight, keeping it still as he started

drawing on her skin, around her scar, on top of it, and turning it into something else. Into a sea with a boat.

“The star guides it,” he said, touching the scar’s centre and then pointed at Eleven’s chest. “You guide it.”

You guide me. You guide us.

Eleven looked at him with tears in her eyes. But she didn’t let them fall. Instead, she pointed to her other leg, to where the knife and cigarettes’ scars were. He nodded and was about to move further, when he noticed he didn’t know how to position himself.

So, Eleven found the solution for them, turning her body to Mike and placing the already drawn leg behind Mike’s back while the other one was carefully put over his lap. Mike gulped. His left hand hesitantly touched her skin once more. He traced the scars on her knee and bent her leg a bit. Eleven moved closer to him, her front touching his right side.

Mike felt nervous now as his moved his arm, which rubbed against her torso, to draw around her scars. He made small stars, flowers, anchors, shells. All kind of small drawings to fill her skin. And he did it carefully, so they wouldn’t turn out bad.

“What are their meaning?” Eleven asked in a tiny voice, her chin touching his shoulder as she watched him draw.

“They can be part of you,” he said. He turned his face slightly to hers, almost touching. “And every part of you... it’s... it’s pretty.”

Eleven blushed and smiled contently, hiding her face against his shoulder. She took a deep breath, inhaling his smell. It was nice. Everything about him was nice.

Suddenly, the bedroom’s door opened.

“Mike, don’t-“

Nancy stopped still, seeing her young brother sitting between the legs of a half-undressed girl. Wait, no. Not just any girl. Eleven. The girl he had been obsessed with since he was twelve. The girl who was

obsessed with him too.

Her eyes moved to what they were doing. She saw the marker pen she had given Mike and Eleven's legs painted. She blinked, confused.

"I'm... I'm going go." Those were the words that came out of her mouth. She turned around and left, closing the door behind her.

There were things that Nancy Wheeler just couldn't deal with. Nor wanted to.

It looks like you've given up

You've had enough

But I want more

Karen Wheeler had left her youngest daughter at the neighbour's house before taking off to the supermarket. Nancy and Mike were both at school. Then, her older daughter would be going to Benny's to work an extra shift and Mike would ride home in his bike. She was sure that Eleven would go with him, so she wanted to be there when they arrived.

It wasn't like she didn't trust the two fourteen-year-olds. It just that they were fourteen-year-olds and they really liked each other. And liked in a way that had certainly overpassed friendship. Karen wasn't blind, nor stupid, despite Joyce's arguments that the two kids wouldn't even think about those kinds of things. But the psychologist didn't know her son that well. And she did not spend every afternoon with them, watching them interact, have non-verbal conversations with their gestures and glances, or simply staring at each other like there was nothing else that mattered.

Karen stopped still in the middle of the cereal aisle. She was looking at all the brands and wondering which one would her kids now want. In moments like these, it was terrible to be a mother. Her kids got so easily bored of that cereal brand, or those cookies, or that stupid rice

which was too solid. It was annoying, really, having to imagine what else they could want every once in a couple of months.

And then there was Ted. The one that annoyed her the most. Her husband. The father of her three kids, who only cared about two of them. He was away on a business trip. Again. She knew he didn't have to go. He volunteered. He was an asshole. Especially after what he had said about their son.

How could he be that ashamed? How could he have lived these past years in silent shame, pretending his son didn't exist, not only in their house, but at his work?

"Mrs. Wheeler."

Karen turned around. She smiled upon seeing Mike's third-grade English teacher, Mr. Carl Thomas. He had been one of the best teachers Mike and Nancy had had. And all the mothers just simply adored him.

"Mr. Thomas, hello," Karen greeted him politely. "How have you been?"

Carl Thomas made a funny face, before saying "Well, been worse, been better. You know, it's life."

Karen chuckled.

"Yes, I know..." And suddenly she thought about her husband again. She was so lonely. She wasn't supposed to feel like this. Not when she had a husband who had promised to be there for her.

"You don't seem okay, Mrs. Wheeler," Mr. Thomas declared, concerned.

Karen forced a small smile.

"Like you said, it's life."

"Do you need to talk to someone?" He asked and looked around. There was a couple down the aisle, picking out cereal boxes. "We can go for a coffee."

“Oh, there’s no need-“ Karen stopped herself and rethought her answer. It was just a polite coffee that Mike’s old teacher was offering her. When was the last time she was with an adult that didn’t involve the psychologist that treated her son, the neighbours’ that took care of Holly, or Jim Hopper when he would pick up Eleven at her house? “Actually, that would be great.”

So, instead of going home to watch over her fourteen-year-old son and his friend, who was more than a friend, Karen Wheeler grabbed her groceries, put them inside her car’s trunk and let Mr. Carl Thomas lead her to a small café near the supermarket.

They ordered two cups of coffee and smiled at each other.

“So, what have you been doing with your life, Mr. Thomas?” Karen asked politely.

“Please, call me Carl. And I’ve been doing what I’ve always done: teach second and third grades students.” He chuckled. “They are great companies, but sometimes... well, sometimes I think I need a grown-up’s company.”

Karen laughed.

“I know the feeling. I spend my days taking care of my youngest, Holly. Then, I take Mike to therapy... I try to keep up with Nancy’s life, but that girl... She just never stops, you know?”

Carl Thomas chuckled. He had an interesting chuckle, that made Karen smile back at him.

“You have got amazing kids, Mrs. Wheeler.”

“Karen,” she corrected. “If I get to call you Carl, then you get to call me Karen.”

Carl smiled at her fondly. The waitress brought their coffees at that moment. They thanked her before turning back to each other.

“So, Karen,” he started and Karen felt warm inside. What was happening? “Like I said, your kids are good. How is Mike doing?”

“Oh, he talks a bit now... He’s in love,” she confessed, making Carl Thomas laugh. “It’s true. It made him talk again. He acts more like a kid, which is what I wanted.”

“That’s good,” Carl agreed.

Outside the café’s window, they saw a bunch of kids roller-skating down the street. Karen recognized John Harrington’s youngest son, Troy, who went to school with Mike. The kid was leading the group, fully clothed in dark colours. Karen pitied him.

“The Harrington kids are very strong,” she found herself commenting with Carl. “Don’t you think?”

Carl Thomas scratched his neck, making a face.

She frowned.

“What is it?”

“You know... They blame me for their mother’s disappearance.”

Karen blinked, surprised.

“How come?”

Carl sighed and took a sip of his coffee.

“It turns out that Lucy Harrington’s last sight was at the school. She had told her husband that she was going to talk to me about Troy’s grades that day... She never showed up. Well, she was seen at the school, but... I never got to see her. John and the kids... They blame me because I was her excuse.” He shook his head, looking devastated. “I wish I knew more about her disappearance... It was awful, you know, having to tell John Harrington’s that his wife never showed up to our meeting. Well, I didn’t even know she was going to meet me... Anyways, the police bothered us teachers a lot and they must have searched the school... what, three times? Really. It was terrible.”

“That sounds... Wow, I never knew that.”

“Most people don’t. The police didn’t want the school, nor the

teachers, to have a bad image to the public. I mean, after all, Lucy ran away, didn't she?"

Karen shrugged. She didn't want to agree or disagree with him. The whole case of Lucy Harrington was the biggest mystery that the city had ever faced and people still talked about it, especially to pity the husband and the two sons that were left behind with no answers. Karen tried to stay out of it. Well, at first, she didn't even pay too much attention since she had had Mike's sudden muteness to occupy her time. Then, she got to know Steve Harrington through Nancy. That boy was good and didn't deserve people talking about him in his back, or, sometimes, right at his face.

"It is life, right?" Carl suddenly said with a polite smile.

Karen smiled back.

"Yes, yes, it is."

Notes for the Chapter:

I hope you're enjoying the story! Kuds & Comments are always welcomed since I love to hear your thoughts on it.

6. Part 6

I don't wanna be someone who walks away so easily

I'm here to stay and make the difference that I can make

School ended in a hot day of June.

Lucas was super excited since he was about to leave for summer camp and this year he would have Dustin's company. It had taken him a while to convince the other boy, and a lot of adventures were promised, as well as the idea that it would be the best summer they would ever have. Dustin did give in, but he wasn't so sure about how realistic Lucas' promises were going to be. He just accepted because, yeah, it would be a cool, new experience.

Will Byers was going to spend the summer with his older brother, Jonathan, who had been in town for a couple of weeks now and was staying until August, before starting a new course somewhere in San Francisco.

Max Winters would be around, minding her own business and maybe starring in a community theatre play. She was still thinking about it.

Eleven was going to spend her summer studying since she wanted to keep up with her friends and move up to Hawkins High School.

And Mike? Well... Mike would be wherever Eleven was.

One night, during dinner, Ted Wheeler informed his family that he wanted to spend a summer vacation outside Hawkins. Nancy refused immediately since she and Steve had started working full-time at Benny's diner again and she'd rather spend her entire summer working as a waitress than fifteen days somewhere alone with her entire family. Well, more precisely, with her father. Karen, however, seemed interested in it, as well as Holly whose eyes brightened up at the idea of going somewhere new. Mike didn't say anything. He had long known that his father had excluded him from whatever family

plans he ever had.

"I'm not going," Mike confided into his mother when she went to his bedroom that night. Sometimes she had the need to tuck him in and make sure he was okay. There were days in which she would feel scared that her son would go back to hide behind muteness and apathetic glances. Tucking him in at night was a way to calm her down. She would know straightaway if he was okay or not.

Karen blinked.

"Mike..."

"I'm not," he stated firmly and turned around on his bed, pulling the sheet up.

Karen talked to her husband afterwards, confirming whether or not he was including their son in his vacation plan.

Ted gave her a hostile glare before leaving the bedroom and going to the bathroom. Karen didn't know how to react. She stood by their bed, staring at the open door. She hadn't even received an answer.

What was she supposed to do?

How was she supposed to act towards her husband?

How could anyone blame her for starting to give up on him? Years after years of feeling alone in a battle that should be fought by the both of them. Years after years of having to put up with him like he was a stubborn child who didn't want to eat his vegetables.

How could anyone judge her, then, for turning somewhere else for company and understanding? For turning to Carl Thomas.

He had become her friend, going out with her for a weekly coffee, both using that hour together to confess their deepest worries and tell their stories. He listened to her and she listened to him. It was all innocent and harmless. Honestly, it was. But no one would see it that way, would they? So, Karen treated Carl like a secret. Going to the oddest places for coffee, meeting "randomly" somewhere public... She had no second intentions, and neither had him, but everyone else

had, so they kept their friendship a secret.

"You need to relax," Carl told her on a warm Friday, after she confided in him her husband's last stupid attitude. "Ted certainly has his way of coping and—"

"It's ridiculous, Carl, honestly," Karen interrupted him. They were by the fruit aisle, Carl carrying a small basket while Karen pushed a cart with Holly inside of it.

"I honestly don't know how to help you, Karen."

Karen sighed.

"I'm sorry."

"No, no. It's okay. You know you can talk to me any time you want." Carl offered an indulgent smile.

Because, unlike her husband, Carl Thomas actually listened to her and wanted to help.

When Karen got home with two bags of groceries and Holly in her arms, she found Mike and Eleven in the kitchen, preparing sandwiches.

"Where are you two going?" Karen placed down the bags on top of the counter and then let Holly go to the floor. The toddlers instantly ran to the living-room.

"To the lake," Mike answered as he passed a finished sandwich to Eleven, who then wrapped it in a napkin.

"Who else is going?" Karen asked.

Mike and Eleven looked at each other for a second, before saying together, "Max."

Karen Wheeler should have known that they were lying. But she suddenly got distracted with Holly's echoed crying and let them go. After all, how many times had they ever been caught in a lie before?

Mike rode his bike with Eleven sitting behind him, her arms wrapped around his middle. It took them about fifteen minutes to get to the lake. It was empty, as always. They had found it two summers ago and knew that most people weren't aware of it, or, if they were, they didn't care to spend their afternoons there.

The lake was surrounded by a small meadow and trees. Right now, it was all green and warm. There was a light, fresh breeze in the air that kept their skins from getting too hot with the sun's heat.

Eleven took out a small blanket from inside her backpack and laid it on the grass. Then, to Mike's surprise, she grabbed a bunch of marker pens from the backpack's front pocket. He blinked, confused, as she smiled shyly at him and rose one marker pen, pointing at herself.

Mike understood what she wanted. So, he nodded, nervous and excited, as she offered him all the marker pens she had brought. They were all different colours and clearly new.

Eleven turned around and, surprising even more Mike, despite the fact that he should have seen it coming, took off her long-sleeved blouse. Underneath it, she was wearing a white bikini, which had thick strings keeping it together and covered a big part of her chest area, as well as her back.

"Nice?" She asked him, looking over her shoulder.

Mike nodded and gulped. She then laid down on her stomach on top of the blanket, giving Mike all the permission to draw whatever he wanted over her skin, over her scars.

The sun's light was hitting on her back, as a blank painting being illuminated for its painter. Mike blinked, stared at her scarred skin for a few seconds, before making up his mind. He grabbed the brown marker pen first. With a careful and nervous hand touching Eleven's back, he started drawing very slowly, making sure he didn't make any mistakes in his movements.

It was a quiet place, the lake. That was why Mike and Eleven liked to go there. Sometimes they would bring their friends, but they all knew what it meant to those two. They had many special spots which only

they knew about. Lucas had once asked Mike what on earth he and Eleven did in those places, all alone for so many hours. Of course, it was followed by a smug look and kissing noises. But Mike had shaken his head. *We enjoy each other's company.*

The scars on Eleven's skin didn't repulse Mike like she had thought they would, nor didn't they make her any less pretty than she already was. Nonetheless, Mike knew they were a part of her that she despised and he wanted to help her see them in other way, as part of a beautiful drawing.

After a while, he put down the marker pens. Eleven turned her head to him, looking at him as if asking if he was done. Mike nodded.

"What did you draw?" She asked, sitting up.

"A forest," he said. "With a cabin in its middle—" He touched the centre of her back – "and an angel at its side." His finger moved a bit to the right, stroking Eleven's skin. She trembled with the touch.

"An angel?"

Mike nodded with a small smile.

"Angels are cool."

Eleven smiled back.

"Yeah..."

She then turned to him and threw her arms around his neck, pulling him to a strong hug. Mike ignored his fast beating heart and hugged her back, laying his chin on her shoulder.

He was only fourteen. He didn't know much about life. He hadn't expected his life to go this way, nor had he known he would meet Eleven. He was thankful he met her. She pushed away all the bad that he felt inside.

His grandma, the mother of his father, would sometimes say that everything in life was planned. Fate knew what it was doing and it would reward those who did well. But Mike was just a kid. He didn't

know what he had done so well that he got to deserve Eleven in his life.

“Mike.” Eleven pulled back, leaving her hands on his shoulders. She stared at him with her sweet brown eyes, adoring him like he was something great. “Do you think love is real?”

Mike blinked.

“Why you ask that?”

She shrugged and pulled away, sitting back on her legs. She bit her bottom lip.

“Sometimes I wonder if it is real.”

“It can be real if you feel it,” he replied.

Eleven giggled.

“What is it?” Mike asked, confused, yet smiling because of her giggle.

“You’re funny,” she said and looked down at the blanket before laying down on it again.

She sent Mike a look that he already understood so well. He put the marker pens away and then moved closer to her to lay down next to her. Eleven turned to her side, still smiling, and placed her hand on his cheek. Mike made a funny expression. She frowned.

“You have cold hands,” he muttered.

“I always do.”

“It’s nice.”

“It is?”

“Yes.”

They leaned forwards and their noses met each other. Mike then moved his head up and kissed her forehead once. Then, twice. Eleven sighed happily.

“This is nice,” she mumbled.

We talk for hours and hours about the sweet and the sour

And how your family is doing okay

Nancy Wheeler was working the night shift at Benny’s diner. Steve had asked for the day off since his family planned a day out of the city. It had surprised Nancy when Steve told her that, and he had noticed and said, “Sometimes we act like a normal family.”

Troy had started going to Joyce Byers’s group therapy a couple of weeks ago. The boy wasn’t an easy case, according to Barb’s secret information. His mother had gone missing six years ago and everyone told him that she had ran away, that she had left him behind. He wasn’t exactly a happy kid and he didn’t like grown-ups very much. Nancy could understand his point-of-view.

“Nancy, table 3 has clients,” one of the other waitresses warned her.

Nancy blinked, waking up from her thoughts, and went to the table. There was a friend of Mike sitting there, the son of the psychologist, with an older boy. They looked alike.

“Hey, Nancy,” Will Byers greeted with a gentle smile.

“Hello, Will,” she said back, taking out a small notebook from her apron’s pocket.

“This is my brother, Jonathan,” Will introduced, pointing at the guy in front of him. “This is Mike’s sister, Nancy.”

Jonathan Byers was skinny and had big dark circles under his eyes like he hadn’t slept in weeks. He gave a small, forced smile to Nancy. Evidently, he wasn’t a people’s person.

“Well, welcome to Benny’s diner, Jonathan. Today’s special is a cheeseburger with a medium coke and French fries.”

“We’ll have two, then,” Jonathan said.

Nancy wrote down their order and smiled at them one last time before going to the kitchen, where Benny was busy cooking five hamburgers at the same time.

“Two more?” He asked.

She nodded. He sighed.

“So, you like it in here?” Jonathan asked his younger brother, keeping an eye out for the waitress.

“Yes, Benny’s burgers are the best. And he is very cool.”

“And the city?” Jonathan wondered and watched as the waitress that had served them left the kitchen and went to another table. She had one of the most interesting polite smiles he had ever seen. Or maybe it was because he had never been very good at being polite to others.

“Nancy is great.”

Jonathan looked at his little brother, frowning. Will laughed.

“I see you’re looking at her a lot.”

“No, I’m not.”

Will gave him a *don’t lie to me* look. Jonathan kept quiet.

“I think she’s dating someone,” Will replied.

“Really?”

He shrugged.

“At least, I think so. I don’t know.”

They were quiet for a moment.

“But she’s cute,” Will added.

Jonathan rolled his eyes.

“Right,” he muttered. Like that could matter to him.

Nancy showed up at that precise moment with their cokes.

“Your burgers will be out in a few minutes,” she informed before walking away.

Jonathan watched her approaching another waitress. They shared a few words before laughing together. Will grabbed his coke and entertained himself by drinking it slowly. His older brother rarely showed interest in girls (he was always too busy doing some course that he never got the time to actually be a teenager), so Will would allow him to take a few minutes of their sibling-bonding time to check Nancy out.

And maybe he would hint it to Mike later, and see what his friend said.

“She doesn’t like dating,” Mike told him the following afternoon, after Jonathan dropped him at the Wheeler’s and tried to take a glimpse inside, checking if Nancy was around. “She dated Steve, but that was ridiculous.”

“But it may be different now,” Eleven remarked as she looked up from her English book.

The two boys looked at her, confused, as Max snickered.

“I don’t get it,” Will mumbled.

“You’re a boy. Boys never get it,” Max said and threw her hair over her shoulder playfully. “You are always too busy thinking *Oh my God, I don’t get giiiiirls* that you forget to actually try and get them.”

Eleven nodded, agreeing, and Mike stared at her, frowning. She gave him a small, devilish smile, leaving him even more puzzled.

Suddenly, there was a knock on Mike’s bedroom door. They looked at it and waited until it was opened. Mike’s mother showed up. She took a quick, approving look at her son’s clean bedroom before saying, “Do you guys want a snack?”

She smiled openly upon seeing their happy reactions.

Will and Max went ahead, asking Karen Wheeler a million questions about what they were going to eat, instead of just waiting to walk down the stairs. Behind them, Eleven grabbed Mike's hand shyly and laid her head on his shoulder.

"I didn't get it," he whispered to her.

She giggled.

"It wasn't about you, Mike."

"Really?"

She lifted her head and leaned up to kiss him on the cheek. He was getting taller and she was stuck at the same height she had been the first time they met. Well, maybe not exactly the same height, but she was getting way smaller than him.

"You're funny, Mike."

"You always say that, but you never tell me why."

They stopped at the kitchen's entrance, hearing how excited their friends were inside. Karen Wheeler had certainly baked a feast for them, as she always did.

Eleven and Mike stared at each other for a few seconds. For some reason, he was feeling nervous. And not the usual nervous he felt around Eleven. This was kind of a scary nervous, like he was supposed to be doing something right, but he wasn't and she knew that.

"Mike."

He blinked. Eleven smiled softly.

"You know why I say it," Eleven remarked and then pulled him through the kitchen's door.

If he thought carefully about it, he knew exactly why she always said

he was funny. He just wasn't ready to assume the significance that those words could have for him, for them. He didn't want – despite really wanting – to start picturing Eleven in his life, forever, looking at him with that soft and amused expression and telling him "You're funny, Mike". Because it was too much. And first love wasn't supposed to be too much. Was it?

Notes for the Chapter:

I apologize for any grammar mistakes. I hope you enjoyed it.

7. Part 7

My friends told me one day I'll feel it too

And until then I'll smile to hide the truth

Nancy Wheeler was intrigued by Jonathan Byers. Maybe it was the way he looked like he didn't care about anything. Or maybe it was the fact that she had already known what kind of person he was before she had actually met him. She had heard Will Byers talking a lot about his older brother and what kind things he was doing with his life. He travelled a lot. He knew the world so much better than she did. And they were the same age. So, yes, Nancy was curious about Jonathan.

But did she do anything about it? No, she just smiled at him whenever he came around Benny's diner. She greeted him politely whenever he dropped Will at her house, or whenever he came to pick him up. She spent the summer wondering about him, but she did it in silence and in secret.

Maybe she should have done something. Or maybe she did the right thing by remaining quiet. But Nancy wouldn't know that since, one day in August, she overheard Will Byers telling Mike that his older brother had gone to San Francisco for this Hispanic Literature course and wasn't sure when he would be returning. In that moment, she felt sad. But she moved on. She always did.

Jonathan Byers went to San Francisco and spent the entire month of August immersed in Hispanic authors and books. He loved it, loved the classes, loved the teacher. Everything. But he wanted to go home. No, not home. He hadn't had a home since he was a kid and his parents got divorced. He wanted to go to Hawkins.

So, one month after he started his course in San Francisco, he called his mother. He had a plan. He made small chat with her and then asked her to talk to Will. When his little brother got on the phone, Jonathan said, "I'm going to need your help in something."

Of course, Will was more than pleased to help.

School started sooner than anyone wanted. Summer went so fast that the kids couldn't believe it was already September and that they were going to be freshmen in high school. They were excited. Really excited. Except Dustin. He was actually really worried.

"They are mean," he murmured to Lucas as they walked into Hawkins High School. "They are really mean." He avoided the stare of a junior boy, who might have only been curious about them since they were so short compared to him. To Dustin, he was already being evil.

"They aren't, Dustin, just chill," Lucas said. Noticing his friend wasn't taking his advice, Lucas put an arm around Dustin's shoulders. "Everything will be okay, buddy."

Behind them, Will and Max were talking about joining the theatre group in this new school since Max had to leave her old group behind and Will was thinking about becoming more active in school's activities. It had been his mother's suggestion.

Mike had stayed by the school's entrance, waiting patiently for Eleven to arrive. She had studied harder than everyone else to be here. She even spent the summer surrounded by books. Mike had helped her whenever he could, of course. He desperately wanted her to move on to high school with them.

Finally, Hopper's truck showed up. Mike moved his schoolbag's strips nervously as he watched Eleven get out of the car and said goodbye to her adopted father. Mike noticed how the chief looked at him through the window and he waved, scared. He knew the chief was expecting him to take good care of Eleven in this new school. He didn't want to fail. He also wanted her to feel safe here.

Almost hopping, Eleven approached him with a huge smile. She was wearing this pink dress and a light, white coat over it. Her schoolbag was new as well. Mike's eyes went from how curly her hair was becoming to her brownish shoes. He suddenly stopped and blinked.

"You aren't wearing long socks," he said.

Eleven bit her bottom lip, nervous, and nodded. If you looked carefully, you could see the scars over her right knee.

“It’s okay, right?”

“Of course it is!” Mike exclaimed and held his hand out for her to take. She did it happily, and they walked into their new school together.

Troy Harrington was being lectured by his older brother, Steve, by his new locker. He noticed Mike Wheeler walking in with that Jane girl and sent them a grumpy glare.

“You shouldn’t do that,” Steve said. “They could be your friends.”

“I have friends.”

Steve snorted.

“Right, like those two assholes you always hang out with can be considered friends.”

Troy tried to punch his brother’s arm, but Steve stopped him before he could actually do anything.

“Relax, Troy. Be friendly,” Steve said and then ruffled with his brother’s hair. Suddenly, he noticed Nancy at the end of the corridor with Barb. “I gotta go. If you need anything, you know where to find me.” And he walked away.

“No, I don’t,” Troy said with a confused expression.

“I don’t think I can open this,” Max looked at the small paper in her hand and then at her locker. “The dude in the office gave me the wrong number.”

“Let me see.” Dustin took a peek at the number in the paper and moved the small, round lock. Finally, the locker’s door opened and he smiled triumphant at Max.

She rolled her eyes.

“Thank you,” she muttered before unzipping her schoolbag and taking out the books she wouldn’t need for the morning.

Mike and Eleven decided to go early to the classroom instead of finding out which lockers were theirs and their respective combinations. They decided to deal with that later. Their priority was to actually get a seat next to each other in every class they could manage together. Out of all, they had three in common: English, Maths and Science. Mike had decided to take Arts with Will, while Eleven was in History with Dustin and Max.

They were comparing schedules when the rest of their friends arrived at the room.

“You two are early,” Will commented as he placed his schoolbag on the table next to Mike’s.

The other three sat in front of them.

Some other students started arriving as well. Most of them were kids that they already knew from middle school, but one or two faces were new. And you also knew that they were new because they didn’t interact with the rest. Everyone else already had that childhood group of friends.

“Do you guys believe that I have to help my sister with her homework?” Lucas abruptly complained, turning around in his seat to look at all his friends. “My mom basically said that I had to, or she would cut some of my privileges.”

“What privileges can you possibly have?” Max asked, looking behind Dustin’s back.

“Comic books. Games. TV.”

Max snorted.

“How terrible.”

“Maybe even football practice,” Lucas added with a pained expression.

“She wouldn’t do that to you,” Will said. “Football is your life.”

“It’s your love,” Dustin added.

“It’s everything to you,” Max finalized.

They all laughed.

“You guys are terrible,” Lucas complained.

Their English teacher was a funny, little woman with a weird accent, but very lively and excited to be teaching them. Mike and Eleven shared a few looks during the class, controlling their chuckles. None of their friends understood what was so funny to them.

Their P.E. teacher... Well, Max, Eleven and Will’s P.E. teacher was a weird guy with a very authoritarian tone of voice. They didn’t like him very much. Lucas told them later that he was the football team coach in this school. Everything made sense then.

Lunch was a break they all had together. So, happily, they found a square, white table empty in the gigantic school cafeteria and sat down with their trays.

Mike saw his sister sitting with Steve Harrington and her best friend Barb a few tables away, but remained in his seat, eating with his friends. He wasn’t quite sure how his sister would react if he acknowledged her here. Steve had no problem in greeting his brother, Troy. But had Nancy a problem? Would she be fine if Mike just walked up to her and greeted her? Or would she feel ashamed, like their father did?

Mike could have lost his voice, but he didn’t lose his vision nor understanding of people’s behaviours. He could see how much his father had changed in the past six years, particularly when it came to him, his only son. He knew he was an embarrassment, something to hide from the world. And why? Because he refused to talk. No one knew why he refused, and the truth was buried deep inside of him, only coming up once in a while in awful nightmares, but his father, unlike his mother, his sister and Joyce Byers, never tried to understand him, never tried to see his side of the all thing. He never

tried to support him.

Six years ago, Mike not only lost his voice like he also lost his father. Sometimes he wondered if he had lost other family members as well. If his mother had at one point given up on him. If his older sister acted like everything was fine, but was actually ashamed of him. If Holly would grow up to distance herself from him, the family's nutcase.

He tried to be a good brother and son. He tried to be what they wanted him to be. But it wasn't his fault if he couldn't control what was inside of him... Those dreadful images, those terrible sounds... And that voice.

Shut up, bitch. Shut up, bitch. Shut up, bitch.

Mike closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

He was fourteen years old. He was with his friends at school. He was okay.

He was okay.

Suddenly, he felt something cold against his hand. He looked down and saw Eleven's hand touching his. He looked up at her. She had a worried expression on her face. He forced a small smile, like saying everything was okay. And, if it wasn't, this wasn't the place to talk about it.

So, Eleven waited until the end of classes. She waited until all their friends went home, Lucas going by car since his mother had to pick up his sister as well, Dustin and Will by bike and Max walking. Mike and Eleven stayed behind, waiting for Mrs. Wheeler to come pick them up and take them to the group therapy.

"Mike," she called. He was sitting at a small bench, near the place they usually parked their bikes. He blinked, confused, hearing her calling for him. She sat down next to him, adjusting her dress, so it didn't wrinkle. "Are you okay?"

He nodded.

“You don’t look okay.”

Mike shrugged.

“There are bad days,” he muttered.

Eleven frowned, concerned, and grabbed his hand. He looked down at their joined hands before taking a quick glance at her.

“You can talk to me,” she said.

“I know... But... I never talk to anyone about it,” he confessed. “And I’m scared.”

“Of what?” She asked.

Mike closed his eyes.

“Of everything.”

He wasn’t just scared. He was tired. He was so tired of putting up with his inner self, with his old memories, with everything that had already happened to him. He was tired of bad days, of nightmares and of being called a weirdo by other kids.

At one point, he had to burst, right? At one point, he had to tell himself that enough was enough. He couldn’t live like this forever.

“Mi-“

Suddenly, Karen Wheeler’s car stopped in front of them. She rolled down the passenger’s window and smiled at them.

“Come on, kids.”

They got into the car quietly. Happily, Karen asked them how their day went and if they had enjoyed their new school. Eleven was the one that answered and explained to her how their day went. When Karen tried to make Mike talk, he just stared at her, almost as if he was mad. She knew he wasn’t having a good day.

Joyce Byers greeted both kids with a happy smile. When Eleven was

the only one to retribute it, she also knew that Mike Wheeler wasn't okay.

"Do you want to talk, Mike?" She asked, despite knowing the answer.

The boy shook his head and walked into the group therapy room, where other kids were already in. To his surprise, Troy Harrington was there. He usually came on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays. Or, at least, that was what Will had told him.

Troy Harrington took one look at the Wheeler kid and made a face.

"Play, dude," another kid asked, holding his set of cards closely to his body.

"Dude, you don't have to hold them like that, geez," Troy complained and threw a three onto the table.

"You know why I do it," the other kid muttered. He had trust issues, always doubting everyone around him, making him go crazy with what they could be saying behind his back, what they could be plotting against him.

"Yeah, yeah, just play."

Troy watched as Wheeler and that Jane girl sat down together, alone, by the bookcase. They had picked up a book and were going to read it together. How stupid they were.

"We can leave," Eleven murmured in Mike's ear.

He gulped and shook his head.

He was fine. He had spent days like this before. He just needed to be left alone.

"Mike,"

"Please, stop."

Eleven blinked, surprised. Mike looked at her.

“Please. I can’t.”

I can't talk right now. I can't be nice. I can't be your Mike.

Because there were days where it sucked. And no one knew why. Even worse, they couldn't even help him because it was all on Mike and his memories and his trauma.

Sometimes he thought it was funny that people called it a trauma. He called it something worse. He called it by the name it had.

“Do you want me to leave?” Eleven asked.

Mike shrugged. He shouldn't have done it, but the response was almost automatic after years of using it. Shrugging took away his responsibility of deciding. It gave power to the other person and left him out of the consequences.

However, that simple gesture really hurt Eleven, who almost never had been the receiver of it. Surprised and shocked that Mike could actually not care if she was around him, Eleven made the decision of getting up and walking away from him. She sat down at a random table. Soon, she realized that she was sitting next to Troy Harrington.

“You want to play?” He showed her the deck of cards. She nodded. “Nice.”

Mike stayed in his place until his mother came to pick him up. Eleven had already left with Hopper. She had said goodbye, but all he managed to give her was a forced smile.

He wished he didn't have days like this. He wished they stopped altogether.

Why did life have to change just because you were at the wrong place, at the wrong time?

And I will remember the words that you said

Left a clouded mind and a heavy heart

“Jonathan is coming back,” Will told his friends with a proud smile
“You guys won’t believe what he is going to do here.”

“What?” Dustin asked, trying to keep his bike side by side with Will’s.

Lucas had to pick up his young sister at her school since his mother had a doctor’s appointment, which she didn’t manage to postpone. So, all the kids followed Lucas to their old school, where they would be meeting Sasha Sinclair.

“You’ll find out soon,” Will answered.

Max, who was skating her way next to them, snorted.

“You can’t just drop a bomb like that and then walk away.”

“But I’m not walking away.”

“It was a metaphor!”

They finally arrived at their destination.

“Sasha!” Lucas waved at his younger sister, who was busy talking to a tall man, by the school’s bus stop.

Eleven frowned, believing she had met that tall man before, but not sure where.

“That’s Mr. Thomas,” Lucas reminded everyone.

Eleven, who was sitting behind Mike on his bike, shook him a bit since she knew he had been his teacher as well. He didn’t react.

“Mike,” she muttered.

Sasha approached her brother, followed by the English teacher, who smiled fondly at all kids.

“Hello.”

“Hi, Mr. Thomas,” Lucas greeted, while helping his sister sitting on his bike. “Come on, Sasha.”

“This is hard!” She exclaimed, trying to find balance since her schoolbag was too heavy. “And you are late!”

“School ends later for me!” Lucas replied.

Mr. Thomas chuckled warmly at the two siblings. His eyes then moved to the other kids, whose names he didn’t know, despite having seen them around Hawkins Middle School. They had never been part of his English class. His eyes finally landed on Mike Wheeler. Karen’s boy. The one that had stopped talking years ago and only managed to find his voice again thanks to the girl who was sitting behind him on the bike. Carl Thomas tried to smile kindly at the kid. He felt like he knew the kid better than he should, having heard so many times Karen talking about her only son.

Mike looked away and Carl Thomas blinked, confused.

To everyone’s surprised, the boy then turned his bike around (Eleven got caught in the middle of his sudden movement and went along with it since she didn’t want to fall) and pedalled away.

“What?” Dustin let out, confused.

“What is wrong with him?” Max asked, making a face. Mike Wheeler was such a weird kid sometimes.

Mr. Thomas frowned, concerned. Had the boy run away because he approached them? But why? Did he... Did Mike know that he and Karen usually met with each other? Was he under the false impression that he and his mother were more than friends? Maybe he should talk to Karen. He didn’t want to cause any problems...

“Mike,” Eleven tried to catch his attention, but the boy kept on riding fast and away from the city.

In a blink, they were in the middle of the forest, going deep into a place they were both very familiar with. The lake. Why was Mike going there at this time? What was happening? Eleven was more worried than scared. She trusted Mike, but the boy wasn’t okay. And, when he wasn’t okay, she couldn’t be okay.

Mike stopped the bike out of the blue. Eleven almost fell, feeling

suddenly unbalanced, and was only able to stay still by grabbing Mike by his jacket and placing her feet on the ground. They were by the steady, clean water of the lake. She could hear how loud Mike's breathing was.

"Mike," she called again.

He suddenly got out of the bike and walked away. He fell onto his knees and his shoulders started to shake violently.

Seeing him like that, Eleven didn't think twice in dropping the bike on the grass and running over to him. Mike was crying loudly and sobbing uncontrollably. She tried to hug him, but he shook his head, pulling her away.

"Mike," she said his name one more time.

"I can't—" He sobbed. "I can't anymore. I can't. El.." He looked at her, his chest shaking with sobs. "I can't keep it in. I just—" His words got swallowed by the tears, his hand touching his chest. It was like he couldn't breathe.

Eleven tried to hug him again and this time he allowed her, letting his head fall against her chest and his eyes close. He kept shaking with sobs. Eleven didn't have the strength to hold him so tightly that he stopped trembling.

"Tell me," she asked him softly. "Don't keep it in."

But Mike kept on crying. His arms went around her body and he held on strongly to her, like she was the only thing keeping him from falling apart.

He couldn't do this anymore.

Six years was enough to keep what had happened in. Six years was enough of nightmares, muteness and fear. He couldn't be afraid anymore. He had to talk. He had to tell someone what had happened. He had to tell Eleven. Because she was a safe haven. She was there for him, no matter what, no matter how. They had each other.

Mike pulled back, his sobs quieting. Eleven touched his face and

cleaned his tears. One sob escaped from between his dried lips. Eleven caressed his cheekbones, worried, but patient. If Mike wanted to speak, he would speak. If he just wanted some quietness, she would give that to him too. She would be what he needed. Always.

"He killed her."

Eleven blinked, confused.

Mike's body started to tremble again.

"He killed her, El," he repeated and tears followed. "He killed her and I watched him doing it. I—" A sob interrupted his speech. Then, another came out and another. Mike was once again wrapped in vicious tears and sobs.

He couldn't stop shaking, holding on to Eleven like his life depended on it.

She was the only thing keeping him from drowning.

Notes for the Chapter:

Are you guys ready for what is coming next?

8. Part 8

I am not the only traveller

Who has not repaid his debt

“I want to talk.”

Joyce Byers blinked, shocked.

It had been such a surprised when Mike Wheeler had willingly asked for a private session with her. And now he, the boy who refused to speak for years, who never once tried to confess what was in his mind, who kept it down and hidden, was telling her he wanted to talk.

“About what?” The psychologist asked.

Mike moved his shoulders, uncomfortable. It had been Eleven’s idea. She had told him to say something. It was never too late. He could still bring some justice. He could still bring some peace to a broken family.

“Lucy Harrington,” Mike answered, looking down at his hands, which were playing with each other nervously.

Joyce blinked again, even more surprised.

“Lucy Harrington,” she repeated. “Why?”

Talk to her, Mike. Feel better by telling the truth.

But what if they judged him? What if they blamed him for not coming forwards before?

“Mike,” Joyce called. “Please.”

He took a deep breath.

“I know what happened to her.”

At that moment, Joyce was torn between calling Hopper or keep the boy talking.

Mike was staring at her, waiting for her permission to explain himself. He was scared. The look on his eyes... They weren't serious as they usually were. No, the boy was terrified. And yet here he was, ready to tell her what he knew about Lucy Harrington's disappearance.

“What happened?” Joyce found herself asking.

Mike took another deep breath.

“I like to read,” he started. “And... In third grade, I used to ask Mr. Thomas, who... who was my English teacher, for books to read... One day, I went to his classroom, where I had left one of my books behind... well, one of the books he had lent me...” Mike coughed. “I was late for Arts, and I knew I should have gone straight to class, but... I really wanted that book, to read after school, so...I went anyways, to Mr. Thomas' classroom.” He paused for a second. “I decided to wait for him and ask for more book recommendations... But he wasn't coming and... I was getting even more late to Arts... Finally, I... I heard him talking in the corridor. I knew he wouldn't give me detention for not being in class... But then, ... there was a woman's voice as well. And I panicked. I was eight...”

Mike stopped talking and looked at the psychologist, scared, like that information had been a terrible one to share.

Joyce forced a small, kind smile.

“I understand, Mike... Please, keep going.”

He nodded, scared.

“There was this small... division, where we kept old books and stuff... I don't remember... I hid in there. And... the door... it had small openings, you know? Like... I could see somehow through it...” Joyce nodded, letting the boy know she understood what he meant. Mike breathed in and out. “There was this woman with Mr. Thomas.

I... I knew who she was because I had seen my mom talked to her, but... I only got to find out her name when Mr. Thomas called for her... Mrs. Harrington. She was also one of my classmates' mother... Troy.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that, sweetie.”

Mike licked his lips, trying to buy him some time.

“They were talking. At first, ... it was... normal? Like... Yeah, a mother talking to a teacher... And then... Then they got closer and... they kissed?”

Joyce blinked a few times. She wanted to react, she wanted to wonder why on earth Lucy Harrington had kissed her son’s English teacher. But she remained still. She had to focus on Mike and his story.

“Keep going, sweetie.”

“It was weird...And gross. At least, I thought it was... I was eight,” he repeated that information, nervous. “But... out of the blue, they started arguing with each other. I don’t know what happened... I... Well, Mr. Thomas... He said he wasn’t going to give her son a better grade just because-“ Mike went quiet. His hands were shaking.

“Mike.” He looked at the psychologist. “It’s okay, sweetie.”

Mike nodded.

“He said... So, he said he wasn’t going to give Troy a better grade just because his mother was... was a good fuck.”

Joyce controlled her reaction one more time. She swallowed a very big desire to speak and motioned for Mike to keep going.

“They were shouting at each other. Mrs. Harrington... She said she was going to tell on him... About everything... I... I don’t know what everything is... I... Yeah... Well...” Mike closed his eyes and started shaking his head. Tears started to fall.

Joyce stood up from her chair and sat down next to the boy. She put

an arm around him, trying to comfort him.

“It’s okay, sweetie...” Mike kept on crying. “You don’t have to talk more...”

The boy shook his head.

“I... I want to finish. I want—“ He sobbed. “I want to tell the whole thing.”

Joyce stroke his back gently.

“Okay, sweetie... But... take your time.”

He nodded.

They remained in silence for a few minutes, while Mike calmed down, cleaned his tears and managed to find a way to stop sobbing.

Finally, he was ready to talk again.

“Mr. Thomas... I don’t know what happened... Something in him just... He hurt Mrs. Harrington. Out of the blue. He... started hitting her... and her head... on... on the desk... and he kept on saying—“ Mike closed his eyes. Joyce tried to soothe him. “He kept on saying... *Shut up, bitch. Shut up, bitch. Shut-*“ Mike shook his head. “He said it so many times and... I watched the whole thing. I... watched how Mrs. Harrington... She dropped to the floor and... she didn’t move. There was blood. So much blood and... Mr. Thomas... he went to lock the door. And then, he turned to where I was.... I panicked... I thought he had seen me. But I hid anyways. I hid behind these boxes. I... He opened the door and he messed around, looking for things... I don’t know what. I closed my eyes and stayed there... I stayed there the whole time, reviving what had happened in my mind... Praying really hard not to be found...”

Mike looked up at Joyce. She blinked.

“When I finally heard silence, I... I left my hiding place... I checked the classroom... Mrs. Byers, it was spotless. Like nothing had happened...” He looked down again. “I had missed Arts class. I didn’t know what to do... I ran away from there. I waited for my mother to

come pick me up... She did. I didn't talk. I couldn't talk, Mrs. Byers. Because... I didn't know what to do." Mike started crying again.

Joyce pulled him closer and touched his head, caressing his dark locks of hair.

"It's okay, sweetie. It was okay for you not know what to do... You were a child. You still are..." She touched his chin and made him look up at her. "You were scared."

He nodded and sobbed.

"It's okay to be scared..."

"I—" Mike tried to control his breathing. "I thought that... if I talked... If I said anything, at all, he would know... He would know that I knew and... he would hurt my mom too. I didn't want that."

"Of course, sweetie, of course."

But I don't answer questions, I just keep on guessing

My eyes are still open, the curtains are closing

"Six years, Joyce," Hopper stated.

"I know, Hop," Joyce replied.

They were at his office, with the door locked. They had made sure no one was listening before Joyce told him everything that Mike Wheeler had confessed to her during their private session the day before.

"It may be too late."

"How can it be too late to put a dangerous man in jail?" She asked, revolted.

"We don't have any proof. We never did... We—" Hopper leaned back

on his chair. “We thought she had ran away, Joyce. That’s how little proof we ever had... We thought she ran the fuck away. How... How can we open the case now?”

“You have to talk to him.”

“And how can I accuse him of that crime?”

“Mike-“

“Mike is a fourteen-year-old boy who didn’t speak for four years straight. Mike is a boy that any attorney will label as “mentally ill”, Joyce.”

“He isn’t-“

“That won’t matter in court, Joyce,” Hopper interrupted her. “That won’t matter to Carl Thomas. If he actually did it.”

Joyce blinked.

“You can’t possibly doubt Mike, can you? I mean...”

“Joyce, I don’t know, okay?” Hopper rubbed his forehead, confused. “I mean, the kid clearly stopped talking for a reason. This reason he gave you? Yes, it’s very, very plausible. But it has been six years. What am I supposed to do with that information now? I mean... I can go talk to Carl Thomas, yes, but... then what? Will Mike testify in front of a court? Will he play his part?”

Joyce stared at Hopper. She wanted to say yes, she wanted to tell him that Mike would without a doubt help bring that man to justice. But Mike was a traumatized kid, who would most likely panic if he was in the same room as Carl Thomas.

“So, what now?”

“I don’t know, Joyce. I don’t.”

That day, Hopper went home tired and with a terrible headache. Eleven was already home, watching TV, holding a cushion on her lap. When she saw him walking into the living-room, she didn’t say

anything, just stared at him. Hopper then realized that the girl knew everything that had happened to Mike. What he had seen. What he had confessed the previous day to Joyce.

Hopper blinked.

“You knew before Joyce did, didn’t you?”

Eleven nodded.

“I was the one that convince him to talk to her,” she admitted.

Hopper took the empty seat next to his adopted daughter and leaned back, closing his eyes. He massaged his forehead, trying to push away the headache, but the bitch wasn’t going anywhere. It was a like a hammer, hitting him over and over behind the eyes.

“Are you mad?”

“Why would I be mad, Eleven?”

“I don’t know. People sometimes get mad and I don’t get why.”

Hopper opened his eyes and took a quick glance at Eleven. She was looking ahead, at the TV, where only commercials were on.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded.

“Yes.”

“How’s Wheeler?”

Eleven looked at him and didn’t say anything.

“So...” Hopper started saying.

“Do you know?” She asked him. Hopper nodded. “Are you going to do something about it?”

“I-“ Hopper shut himself up and looked away. “I’m looking into it.” It wasn’t a lie. He would look into Mike’s statement and the old Lucy

Harrington's case. He just wasn't sure what good could be done at this point.

I'm feeling younger

Every time that I'm alone with you

"No one has done anything."

Eleven looked at Mike, worried.

They had been studying quietly in his basement. The door, on top of the stairs, was open since Karen Wheeler never allowed them to be together in a closed room. But it was pointless of having *that* door open since no one could hear, or see them. Moreover, they were pretty sure that the only person in the house was Nancy, and she was probably locked in her room studying as well.

"It's still soon."

"It has been a week," Mike replied. He put down his pencil. Eleven knew he was getting edgy. Ever since he confessed everything to Joyce Byers that he has been more afraid, more open to panic attacks. He was scared to one day be face to face with Carl Thomas and he would hurt him. Or his family.

Eleven put down her pencil as well and approached Mike, who was on the other side of the small wooden table. She wrapped her arms around his torso and pulled him closely. Mike laid his head against hers.

They remained quiet for a while. Mike's breathing matching Eleven's. Her hand caressing his back, trying to keep him calm. His eyes closed, trying to find peace within and with Eleven by his side. She always calmed him down.

Telling Eleven what had happened six years ago was easier than he thought it would be. Yes, he cried a lot. Yes, he took him a while to

clean the tears and control the sobs. But, when he did, they laid down together on the grass and he told her everything that had happened on that day. And Eleven... His Eleven... She hugged him and let him feel safe. It wasn't like they could protect each other from any bad out there. They couldn't. But they felt like they could. And that was what matter to Mike. It was what made him snap out of bad thoughts and violent cries. It was Eleven, with him. It was her, by his side, forever.

"You're too much," he mumbled and pulled back to look her in the eyes. "Aren't you?"

Eleven didn't hesitate in saying, "You're too much too."

He half-smiled.

"And a funny guy?"

She smiled.

"And a funny guy," she agreed. "You're a very funny guy, Mike."

"Can—" Mike stopped himself.

He looked away for a second, shy, before Eleven's hand touched his cheek and made him look at her again. She waited patiently, like she always did, while he messed around in his thoughts, trying to find the right thing to tell her. Because he always wanted to say to her the right thing.

"I can be a funny guy for as long as you want me to be it."

Eleven's smile grew.

"Forever?"

He blinked.

Did she really want that? A forever with him? But weren't they only fourteen? Didn't they know so little about life yet? How could they promise that to each other so soon?

But he wanted it to be forever. So, why wait and pretend it wasn't?

"Forever," he repeated. "Promise."

"Promise is good."

And they both leaned in at the same time and shared a soft, innocent kiss. They smiled against each other's lips.

"Honestly, you two."

They pulled away at the sound of Nancy's voice. She was standing in the middle of the stairs, looking at them with her arms crossed.

"I'm getting tired of walking in on you two, really." Both Eleven and Mike kept staring at her. She rolled her eyes. "Anyways, Hopper is here."

Blushing, Eleven gathered her books and put them all inside her schoolbag. Mike also grabbed all his books and walked up the stairs with her. Nancy had already left to go meet the chief of police by the door. She had a very serious face when Eleven and Mike approached them.

"Are you ready, kid?"

Eleven nodded.

Hopped nodded back and his eyes adverted to Mike.

"How are you, kid?" He asked him.

Mike shrugged.

"Good," the chief muttered, before touching Eleven's shoulder and pulling her with him. "Have a good night, you two."

"You too, chief Hopper," Nancy replied with a forced, polite smile.

Mike just stared at Eleven as she walked away side by side with Hopper. Nancy took one look at her brother and sighed before closing the door.

“Mike, we need to talk.”

He blinked and looked up at her.

“What is it?”

Nancy motioned with her head to the kitchen. They went in and she fixed them a quick glass of orange juice that their mother had bought earlier that day. Nancy suddenly frowned. If her mother had gone to the supermarket that morning, where was she now?

“What is it?” Mike repeated her question, sitting at the table.

“Why does the chief want me to take you to the police station tomorrow?” She asked as she walked up to him.

Mike looked down at the table, feeling betrayed. He had begged not to tell.

Mike’s confession had remained a secret between him, Eleven, Hopper and Joyce. Mike had asked over and over again to the psychologist not to tell his mother what he had told her. He was scared. It was like if his mother knew, then she would be in danger. Like Troy Harrington’s mother had been in danger. Joyce tried to tell him that wouldn’t happen, but the boy didn’t change his mind. For now, no one in the Wheeler family should know what they knew about Mike. No one.

“And that includes Holly,” Mike had said to the psychologist.

But it turned out that the chief of police didn’t think like that.

“He told me not to tell mom,” Nancy suddenly admitted. “Why?”

Mike took a sip from his glass.

“Mike, please.” He looked up at his sister. “Trust me.”

So, Mike, taking a quick glance at the kitchen, like making sure they were really alone, started telling her what he had told a week ago to Joyce Byers.

“I just wanted my book back and-“

There was a sudden knock on the door.

Nancy stood up, frowning, since her brother had just started telling her a weird story about when he was eight and had gone to his English teacher’s classroom to fetch a book he had left there, and walked to the door. She opened it and came face to face with one of their neighbour’s. She was holding Holly.

“Playdate is over and your mother hasn’t come to pick her up yet,” Mrs. Olsen told her with a polite smile. Deep down, she was probably mad.

“Oh, I’m sorry... Mom went... to the supermarket. She must be stuck in line or something...” Nancy stretched her arms to pick up Holly. “Well, thank you, Mrs. Olsen. Have a good day.”

“You too, Nancy.”

Nancy closed the door and took Holly with her to the kitchen, where her brother was quietly waiting.

“Do you want a snack, Holly?”

Her sister shook her head.

“I’m full,” the five-year-old said.

Nancy sat down next to Mike again and left her younger sister on her lap. The little girl tried to reach for her brother, who forced a smile and gave her his hand for her to hold.

“You can keep going.”

Mike gulped and nodded.

He went back to his story, to his weird story about how he wanted a book from his English teacher’s classroom. And then, out of the blue, the story went darker. And suddenly Lucy Harrington was on it and she was kissing Mike’s old English teacher. And then, they were fighting and arguing and Mike was hiding inside a sort of storage

room in the classroom.

“He... He hit her head on the table... So many times and-“

“Stop,” Nancy asked, brutally unstable. She looked down at Holly, who was playing with Mike’s fingers. She seemed unaffected by the story. Perhaps she wasn’t listening. “Mike, you’re... you’re telling me that... Steve’s mom... She...”

“Mr. Thomas mur-“

“What’s his first name?” Nancy asked her brother. She didn’t want him to use the word he was going to use in front of Holly. She was too young to hear that.

“Carl.”

“Carl,” Nancy repeated.

“Carl is a friend,” Holly suddenly said.

Both teenagers looked down at their sister, frowning, and then at each other.

“She has a friend called Carl?” Nancy asked. Mike shrugged. Nancy moved Holly on her lap, turning the girl to her. “Who is Carl, Holly? Is he your friend?”

Holly shook her head, trying to reach for her brother’s hand again.

“No, mommy’s friend.”

Mike and Nancy looked at each other again, worried.

“Maybe it’s another Carl,” Nancy said.

Mike started shaking his head.

“How does he look like, Holly?” Nancy asked.

“Tall.” Holly was almost out of her sister’s lap and trying to get to Mike. “Hand, Mike, hand.”

Mike didn't react to his sister's words. He was breathing heavily and his body was starting to tremble.

Carl... Carl Thomas... Was he... Was he friends with his mother?

She was in danger, then. Years after years of keeping it down and yet his mother was in danger. He had got to her. He was going to hurt her and it was all on Mike because he didn't say anything soon and-

"Mike, calm down."

He shook his head and his breathing got worse. He wasn't seeing well, he wasn't breathing well, everything was shaking.

Nancy put Holly down on the floor and then kneeled in front of her brother.

"Mike, breathe."

But her brother wasn't reacting. He kept shaking and his breathing got caught up in his throat.

"Mike, lean over, come on." She helped him do it. "Breathe in and out. In and out. Mike, please."

Holly was staring at her siblings with her mouth wide-opened and a concerned look. There were tears threatening to fall. Her brother wasn't okay. Her sister was almost panicking because he wasn't okay. Little Holly didn't know what to do. So, she started to cry.

"Holly, no." Nancy took a quick look at her young sister and then back at her brother, whose breathing was still chaotic, but not as much as before. "Keep breathing, Mike. Find something to focus on. Think about anything. Focus on-" Nancy stopped. "Focus on Eleven."

Mike looked at his sister before his mind was flooded with memories of Eleven.

Her smile. Her voice. Her cold hands. Her hugs. How she always told him he was a funny guy. What those words meant. What they meant to each other.

Mike took a finally deep breath and felt the waves of nervousness and panic disappearing from his body. He wasn't shaking anymore, nor was his vision blurry.

"Are you okay?" Nancy asked him calmly.

Mike nodded.

Holly's cries started go grow bigger and bigger.

Seeing her brother was okay, Nancy then turned to her sister and took her into her arms, standing up. Mike watched as both his sisters left the kitchen, Nancy soothing Holly until she stopped crying.

He had just had panic attack. In front of Nancy. In the middle of their family's kitchen. What if their dad had shown up? What if their mother did? What could he have possibly told her?

And how was he supposed to react to the fact that maybe, just maybe, his mother was friends with that monster?

Of course, he was an enchanting guy. All mothers thought that. Even when he was a seven-year-old boy meeting his English teacher for the first time, he had known how mothers reacted to his presence. Everyone knew.

Nancy came back after a while.

"She's watching cartoons," she informed him as she sat down next to him again. To his surprise, she grabbed his hands. "Mike, what you saw... Is it true?"

"Of course it is," Mike replied. "Why would—" He gulped. "Why would I lie, Nancy?"

She shook her head.

"You wouldn't..." She sighed. "If Steve—"

"Don't tell him. No one knows, Nancy. I don't even know what the chief is planning to do..." Mike looked away, sad. "I think he might believe it's too late... Was I quiet for too long?"

Nancy knew that the answer to that question was a yes. But she couldn't say that to her brother. He had witnessed a terrible crime, which traumatized him for years. Was it his fault that the Harrington's didn't have peace? No, of course not. He had been just a kid. It was all Carl Thomas' fault.

"Do you—" Nancy licked her lips. "Do you think he might have done it more times?"

Mike frowned and shrugged. He honestly had no clue. No more women had gone missing in the past years, nor before Lucy Harrington.

"Maybe we should investigate it," Nancy stated. Mike looked at her like she was crazy. "What? We may find something to incriminate him."

"Missing people aren't going to incriminate him, Nancy," Mike replied weakly. "Him confessing would."

And that wouldn't happen.

Notes for the Chapter:

I hope you guys enjoyed it! I'm sorry I didn't reply to your comments. I'm on vacation and I only got the time to come and post this chapter! Happy Easter!

9. Part 9

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm sorry for only posting today. Life has been crazy.
I hope you enjoy it.

All those rumors, they have big teeth

Oh, they bite you

“We need to talk to your mother as well, Mike.”

“No.”

Jim Hopper frowned. Nancy looked at her young brother, worried. Mike was dead serious on his decision of keeping their mother out of this.

“If what you said it’s true and... if she is indeed being friendly with him, then-“

“Then, she would freak out,” Mike interrupted. He looked at his sister for assurance. “Right? She would be more in danger if she knew. Because he would know.”

Hopper sighed and put down his pen. He had been writing Mike’s testimony, trying to check if what he said could match what they already had in Lucy Harrington’s case. Trying to find something that would help them convict Carl Thomas. But all they had was his words. Six-years-later words.

“Are you going to talk to him?” Nancy asked the chief.

Hopper nodded.

“I’m still trying to figure out how and when... I can’t just go accuse

the man of a crime he allegedly committed six years ago.”

“He did it. I’m not lying.”

Hopper sent Mike a sympathetic look.

“I know, kid. But, if he did it, then he has got away with it for six years. How could we have evidence now? He would know... He would know that someone knew. That there was a witness. Do you think he wouldn’t try and figure out who the witness was?”

Wouldn’t he try and get rid of the witness?, that was the question that the chief left unspoken. He didn’t want to scare Mike. The kid was already too scared.

Nancy looked between her brother and the chief.

“We’re not telling our mother,” she stated. “But, please, keep us in touch. And, please, keep him protected.”

Hopper nodded, promising.

The Wheeler siblings left the police station. Nancy had borrowed their mother’s car, who stayed at home, cleaning and believing her two kids went out to bond with each other. Or, at least, that was what they hoped she believed.

Karen Wheeler had had a strange conversation with Carl Thomas the previous afternoon. He had said Mike acted like odd upon meeting him at Hawkins Middle School. Maybe he knew about their friendship and, being worried about her family, Carl advised her to talk to her son. He didn’t want Mike to believe there was something going on between his old teacher and his mother when there wasn’t.

So, Karen waited impatiently until her kids came back home from a small trip to an ice cream shop. She watched as Nancy whispered something to Mike before walking up the stairs. Her son stayed still in the hall, staring ahead.

“Mike,” she called. He looked over at her. She motioned to her head to the living-room, where she had been watching a bit of TV. “Come here, please.”

Mike didn't move. She could see apprehension in his eyes. She frowned, concerned.

"Mike, are you okay?"

Karen stepped forwards, almost out of the living-room area and into the hall.

As if her closeness had awakened something inside Mike, he started nodding his head frenetically.

"I'm fine," he muttered. "I just... Homework."

And he escaped up the stairs fast. Karen's frown deepened as well as the feeling of instability and uncertainty that had been bubbling inside her. Mike never acted like that with her. What did he think he knew to make him act like this towards her?

Nancy came down the stairs again, wearing another jacket and a different purse.

"Where are you going?"

"To Barb's. I told you I was going there twice yesterday."

Karen looked down, trying to remember.

"Oh, okay," she let out, defeated by her own memory. She didn't remember. How bad of a mother was she being?

Nancy sent her a weird look before walking out of the door.

Karen was alone. She had thought she had felt loneliness before, every time Ted wasn't there for her and for their family. But, at this moment, with Mike locked in his bedroom, basically hiding from her, Nancy leaving the house weirded out by her, and Holly taking a nap, she felt truly alone.

What was happening in this family? Where did she go wrong? She should have kept them all together. That had been her role. Always. The mother who saved everyone's day. The mother who was there for her children. The mother who listened. The mother who was the

opposite of their father.

Why did she suddenly feel like Ted?

Suddenly, she heard keys clacking together. A key was inserted into the house's front door. Ted showed up, with his typical suitcase and a tired look.

"Hello, dear," he greeted, closing the door behind him. He then approached her and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Where are the kids?"

"Which ones are you talking about?" Karen snapped, mad. Mad at herself. Mad at her husband.

Ted stared at his wife.

"Karen, don't start."

"What?" Karen tried to act innocently. "It's a question that has to be made at this point, isn't it?"

Sighing, Ted started to undo his tie and stepped away from his wife, going to his La-Z-Boy recliner, where he placed his suitcase.

"I just got home. Do we really have to fight?"

Yes, because I'm feeling like a shitty parent, and that's what you are, not me.

Of course, Karen didn't say those words out loud, despite Ted deserving to hear them.

"Fine." She moved her boy's weight from one foot to another. "Do you want something to drink, then?" She asked.

Ted sat on the recliner's arm and nodded.

"Yes, please."

"Then, go make yourself one."

Karen walked out of the living-room.

I found a love, to carry more than just my secrets

To carry love, to carry children of our own

“Jonathan Byers is what now?”

“Working as a volunteer in Hawkins Middle School.”

Nancy blinked as Barb repeated the information that Joyce Byers had shared with her the previous day.

“He came back and is now tutoring kids there, after school hours. I think it’s very sweet,” Barb added, copying something from their Biology book to her notebook. They had a big test coming up.

He’s back. What now?

Out of the blue, there were loud steps suddenly coming from outside the bedroom. Nancy stood up and went to check on who it was.

On the other side of the stairs, she caught Mike opening his bedroom’s door, with Eleven by his side. They looked at her over their shoulders.

“Keep the door open,” she warned them.

Mike rolled his eyes.

“Mom said that already,” he muttered and walked in, followed by Eleven.

The door was left open and Nancy could see them taking off their schoolbags and dropping them on his bed before going to his desk.

“Let your brother and his girlfriend have some privacy,” Barb suddenly said.

Nancy glared at her friend.

“She’s not his girlfriend.”

Barb snorted.

“At this point, she really has to be, Nance. Stop being such a big sister.”

Nancy rolled her eyes and closed the door. She walked up to her bed, where they had been studying.

“I’m just stating a fact. She isn’t. Or he would have said something.”

Barb lifted an eyebrow.

“Your brother isn’t known for saying stuff, Nance.”

On the other side of the corridor, Mike and Eleven were sitting by his desk, sharing a chair between the two, and checking out the birthday invitation that they had got at school from one of their classmates.

“I don’t know her very well,” Mike said, reading the name *Maria O’Neil* on the pink card. The invitation was to spend a Saturday afternoon at her place, which was a few streets away from Mike’s place. Everyone in their English class had been invited.

“But she is nice,” Eleven told him. “She is in my History class as well.”

“Maybe we could go?” Mike asked, hesitant.

Eleven shrugged.

“Let’s see what the others say?”

Mike nodded.

“Yeah...”

They left the paper on top of his desk and moved to his bed to study English together. They were going to have a test next week. Eleven was super nervous about it because she didn’t want to fail. She felt she was still a bit behind compared to the rest of the class.

“It’s gonna be alright,” Mike tried to reassure her.

She forced a small smile.

Almost on the other side of the town, in Joyce Byers' office, the psychologist was sharing a cup of coffee with Jim Hopper as they discussed the Wheeler boy's case. More importantly, Karen Wheeler's role in all this and what they should do.

"I have to talk to Carl," Jim said. "But I'm working on my approach. Meanwhile, Karen Wheeler is assumedly his friend... Or, at least, that's what their kids say that their youngest sister says..." He shook his head, defeated. Who would have thought that the chief of police would one day have to believe in a five-year-old girl statement?

"Children are the most honest ones," Joyce commented. Hopper snorted. "It is true, Jim. They see what happens and they don't mingle society believes or thoughts in it."

"Well, yes, but..." He sighed. "Anyways, I'll probably talk to Karen, check out if she has been indeed socializing with Carl Thomas..."

"And what reason will you give her to talk to her about that?"

"Eleven."

Joyce frowned.

"Eleven?"

"I'll just say that the girl talked about that teacher... I don't know."

Joyce shook her head, disapproving his idea.

"Do you have any better one?" Hopper asked.

Joyce was about to deny, when a sudden thought occurred to her.

"Jonathan is volunteering at Hawkins Middle School. That's where that teacher works... I can make conversation with Karen about that."

Hopper nodded.

“Okay, okay... That’s good, Byers.”

Joyce smiled, proud.

“Of course it is, Hopper.”

So, right when the opportunity showed itself and Joyce Byers was face to face with Karen Wheeler, the following day when the woman came to pick up her son, she started the conversation.

“My eldest son is at Hawkins Middle School.”

Karen blinked.

“Really?”

Joyce nodded and stopped walking before reaching the group therapy’s room.

“He is tutoring kids. Free of charge.”

“That’s incredible.”

“Yes, he talked to me about some teachers... Like Cecily Lu, Claire Young, and Carl Thomas.”

At that last time, Karen froze, staring at Joyce. The psychologist rose an eyebrow.

“Do you know him?”

“Oh, yes. He was Mike’s teacher a few years ago. He’s good, I suppose.”

“Jonathan hasn’t complained,” Joyce stated. “But...” The woman looked both sides. “I heard he’s quite interesting... Is it true?”

Karen blinked.

“I... I guess?”

“You don’t know him?”

The other woman shrugged shyly and started walking again, trying to avoid the conversation.

“I see him once in a while. At the supermarket. It’s a small town.”

“Of course. Small town.”

Joyce opened the group therapy’s room’s door. Mike was sitting at a round table, playing cards with Troy Harrington and Eleven. He looked bored, almost annoyed to be there, but Eleven was having a good time.

“Mike,” Karen called. The boy looked over Eleven’s shoulder, who also turned upon hearing her calling Mike’s name. “Come on. You too, Eleven.”

The girl smiled, happy that Karen Wheeler hadn’t forgotten her promise to let her have dinner with them that night, and gave Troy his cards back. Mike just laid his on the table and stood up. They went to fetch their schoolbags together and then walked out.

Karen was about to follow them when Joyce stopped her. She frowned.

“Would you mind coming here tomorrow, Karen?”

“What for?”

Joyce pretended to be ashamed.

“It’s kind of getting boring... Being surrounded by kids all afternoon... And the nurses never stop by for too long... It-“ Joyce pretended to forget the idea. “It’s just a stupid idea.”

“Oh, I don’t mind.”

Joyce started smiling.

“Really?”

“Of course.”

Karen smiled back, keeping an eye out for Mike and Eleven, who had stopped a few steps away and were now holding hands.

“Well, then, we’ll see each other tomorrow?” Joyce asked in a hopeful tone of voice.

Karen nodded.

“Yes, certainly.”

They said their goodbyes and Karen approached her son and his friend. They were looking at her, confused. She smiled softly.

“Let’s go home, shall we?”

“What were you two talking about?” Mike asked straightaway.

Karen frowned at her son’s tone of voice.

“Since when do you get to ask those questions, mister?”

He looked away, almost ashamed. Karen pushed their backs, making them start walking.

“I’m going to spend some time with Joyce. That’s all,” she informed her son as soon as they arrived at the lift and she pressed the button calling for it.

Mike didn’t say anything. He didn’t know if he should be pleased or not with that information. Why did his psychologist want to spend time with his mother?

“Mrs Wheeler?” Eleven suddenly said. Karen looked at her. The young girl was smiling shyly. “Can Mike come to a birthday party next Saturday?”

Mike gave her a serious look while his mother frowned.

“I haven’t heard anything about a birthday party.”

“I was going to tell you today,” Mike muttered.

They walked into the lift.

“Well, whose birthday is it?”

“A girl from class,” Mike murmured.

Karen thought for a second about it, since she had already plans for the family next Saturday, but, in the end, she nodded, agreeing.

“Okay, but Nancy will drive you. Your dad and I are going to take Holly to your grandparents. They have been annoying us to go there...” She sighed. “They will annoy me even more when I get there with only one of you three.”

Mike controlled a chuckle.

“Grandma Hols?”

Karen nodded.

Holly had been named after Karen’s mother and Nancy after Ted’s mother. Mike had been a surprise since they had thought he would be a girl until he was actually born. At that time, Karen decided she wanted him to be named Michael and Ted went along since his wife had just given birth to their child and wasn’t in the mood to argue.

“She’s cool,” Mike commented.

Karen smiled at him.

That night, Ted wasn’t home for dinner, so, in the kids’ perspective, everything went well. In Karen’s, she was just sad and lonely.

Maybe she could talk to Joyce about it... The psychologist could give her some advices on what to do.

Karen took a sip of her wine. She had to admit to herself that she felt scared. What if the psychologist’s words weren’t the ones she wanted to hear? What if it was already too late?

“Mom, can you pass the potatoes, please?” Nancy asked.

Karen blinked, feeling like she was waking up from a dream. She grabbed the bowl of potatoes and passed it on to the eldest daughter,

who murmured a thank-you.

If it was already too late, Karen wasn't that scared. Or stressed, she realized. It already felt like it was too late to save their marriage, so why bother if someone else told her the same?

We are still kids, but we're so in love

Fighting against all odds

Nancy told herself to relax. She was only going to miss half an hour of study by dropping her brother at the O'Neil's house. Thirty minutes and then she was home, studying for the Biology test she was going to have on Tuesday.

Mike was sitting next to her, watching the streets go by as the car moved. He was quiet and had a small, wrapped in yellow paper gift in his lap. He had bought it along with Eleven, but he was the one that got the job of bringing it.

“Is Eleven there already?” Nancy asked.

Mike shrugged.

Nancy licked her lips, thoughtful.

“Is she your girlfriend?”

Mike turned his head to his sister, eyes wide-opened.

“W-what?”

“Eleven. Your girlfriend?”

Mike's face turned red as he shook his head frenetically.

I knew it.

Finally, they arrived at the O'Neil's house. Mike whispered a thank-

you and was about to leave the car when he heard his sister's door opening as well.

"What? I'm taking you to the door."

Mike rolled his eyes.

They walked together in a comfortable silence until they stopped at the O'Neil's front door. Nancy rang the doorbell and they waited patiently.

"No one is coming?" Nancy complained and was about to ring the doorbell again when the door suddenly opened.

The Wheeler siblings blinked, surprised.

It was Jonathan Byers that opened the door.

Nancy stared at him.

"Oh, hey."

Jonathan smiled.

"Hello." He looked at Mike. "The boys and Eleven are already here."

Mike's eyes beamed with happiness.

"Can I go in?" He asked his sister.

She nodded. Mike almost skipped his way into the house.

Nancy and Jonathan shared a look.

"What are you doing here?" She finally asked him.

"I tutor Mrs. O'Neil younger daughter, Cecil. When I came to drop Will off, she kind of insisted for me to stay..." Jonathan seemed embarrassed by his own story.

Nancy let out a surprised sound.

"Interesting," she added.

He smiled at her.

“Do you want to stay as well?”

Nancy blinked.

She shouldn’t. She had to study. She had a test. A big, important test.

“Sure.”

She walked in and Jonathan closed the door behind them. He motioned with his hand for her to follow him and they found themselves outside the house, in a small, decorated garden. There were balloons everywhere and big, pink letters forming a HAPPY BIRTHDAY MARIA, strapped together in a string and hung between two trees.

The backyard was full of young teenagers, playing around and talking loud. Mrs. O’Neil was a petit woman, standing by a small table of snacks talking to another woman. Her youngest daughter, Cecil, was sitting on a chair, eating chips after chips.

Nancy found Mike next to Eleven, and the birthday girl, Maria, had a small book in her hands and was talking happily to them.

“Oh, hello,” Mrs. O’Neil said as she saw Nancy approaching shyly, next to Jonathan.

“I’m Nancy Wheeler,” Nancy said as she stretched her hand out to greet the woman. “I came to drop Mike’s off.”

“Oh, Mike came? Good.” Mrs. O’Neil smiled. “You can stay for a while if you want.”

Thank God I was already going to do that.

“Thank you.”

On the other side of the garden, Maria was gathering all her twenty guests. She clapped her hands twice and said loudly, “What game can we play?”

“Football,” one of the boys said.

Maria screwed up her nose.

“No.”

“Hide-and-seek?”

“We’re fourteen, come on.”

Mike looked at Eleven, almost as if he was looking for help. They were never going to leave this circle of game ideas. Maria was going to go on and on until she came up with one.

And she did.

“Fine. Here’s what we are going to do: whoever wants to play football, go play football.” Four guys and three girls left the group, wandering to where they had left the football ball. “Whoever wants to play catch, go.” Five kids, including Lucas, left the group. In the end, there were ten kids remaining. Maria smiled widely. “Let’s go to my basement.”

The other kids followed her, some confused, others excited. Mike grabbed Eleven’s hand, both walking behind everyone else.

Maria’s basement had a similar structure to the Wheeler’s, yet it was painted in yellow and felt more like a living-room than an actual basement. Dustin and Will shared a look, impressed, as Max found herself a good spot on the brown sofa.

“So, what game are we going to play?” A kid asked Maria.

She held a finger up, as asking for them to wait a second, and then went to another side of the basement, searching for something inside a bunch of boxes. She came back with a plastic bottle.

“Spin the bottle.”

Eleven frowned and looked at Mike, feeling stupid because she had no idea what that game was. But Mike didn’t notice her gaze. He was staring wide-eyed at the bottle like it was a weapon. Everyone else in

the room was acting okay with Maria's game suggestion.

"Mike," Eleven called quietly as she leaned closer to him. "What's Spin the Bottle?"

He gulped and, at that moment, Maria spoke.

"Let's get into a circle!"

Everyone started moving around, girls giggling, boys sharing proud looks.

Will, who had yet moved from his spot by the stairs, suddenly confessed, "I'm actually going to go play catch with the other boys." And he walked out of the basement, climbing the stairs fast before anyone called him back.

"That's a pity," a blonde girl said and her friend giggled.

"Mike, Jane, come on," Maria called.

Eleven tried to move, but Mike's hand, which was holding hers, grabbed her still. She looked confused.

"I don't know how to play this game," she confessed out loud.

"Oh," Maria let out and smiled wickedly. "It's easy. You spin the bottle and, whoever it lands, you gotta kiss them."

Eleven's eyes went wide-opened.

She had to kiss those boys in the basement? But she didn't know them well... She only knew Dustin and kissing him wasn't a thought she had ever had before.

Eleven looked at Mike, worried. He kept quiet.

"Guys, come on, don't be shy," one of the girls said.

Mike shook his head.

"We're gonna pass."

One of the guys snorted. His name was Jack. He was tall, blonde. Girls liked him a lot.

“Just because you don’t want doesn’t mean Jane feels the same.”

Jack looked at Eleven, expectant. But the girl frowned deeply and shook her head.

“Listen, guys,” Maria started, putting down the bottle in the middle of the circle, “the only way you can stay out of the game if you have a boyfriend or a girlfriend. Because I’m not going to be the one here supporting cheating.”

Eleven kept looking at Mike, wondering what they should do. Mike looked back at her before his eyes went to their friends, Dustin and Max, who were impatiently eager as they waited for him to talk. He knew he should talk.

But should he say it? Should he assume things for him and Eleven? Should he label them just because others were forcing them to?

But they’ll kiss her, the sudden thought occurred. And Mike couldn’t allow that.

“So, how-“

“We’re dating,” Mike claimed.

Maria rose an eyebrow. Everyone else stared agape.

“Really?”

Mike gulped and looked at Eleven, scared that he had crossed the limits. Maybe this wasn’t what she wanted. Maybe all they had was a friendship. Maybe-

But Eleven swiftly nodded, confirming Mike’s words proudly.

“Of course.”

Mike’s heart beat fast. Of course. Of course they would be dating. How stupid can anyone be not to see that?

"Well, congrats," Maria said. "Then leave. No cheating here."

The last thing Mike saw before turning around to leave the basement with Eleven was the smirks on Max and Dustin's faces.

Mike and Eleven stood by the basement's door. He stopped still, his heart hammering scared, while his eyes avoided Eleven.

Did he do the wrong thing? Was this the worst way of asking her out?

Mike almost jumped when he felt Eleven's cold hand touching his.

"Did you mean it?" She asked shyly.

Mike nodded.

"Of course."

Eleven smiled and he swore he had never seen that kind of smile on her face before. It was much more than just happiness, or those cute smiles she sent him whenever they were being enigmatic. It was a new smile, one that he knew she would only show him.

They closed the distance between their bodies instinctively. Their eyes lowered, almost shy with the situation, like it was all new to them, and their noses touched before they kissed softly.

Mike couldn't control the happy feeling inside him. Eleven was his girlfriend. He was her boyfriend. Finally.

Suddenly, there was a cough.

Eleven and Mike pulled apart, surprised with the interruption.

Who they saw wasn't someone they hadn't expecting. Eleven felt her right hand, the one that Mike had grabbed during their kiss, starting to hurt. The grip he had on it started to increase, as his breathing did, and she knew he was in the beginnings of a panic attack.

Carl Thomas was standing just a few steps away, smiling at them innocently, almost teasingly because he had just caught them kissing.

He was completely unaware of what was going on inside Mike's mind. The images crossing his memory. The sounds of Lucy Harrington suffering, dying. Those words... The threat that had left that man's mouth that day.

Shut up bitch shut up bitch shut up bitch

"Hello kids."

Mike turned around and ran deeper into the house. Eleven froze, feeling Mike slipping away, scared for his life. She knew he would be panicking somewhere and that she should be there for him. But she just couldn't let Carl Thomas stay there, confused, acting like he wasn't the reason why Mike was bad. Why Mike had so many panic attacks.

"You're a bad man," she stated before turning around and running after her boyfriend.

Eleven knew straightaway where Mike was because there was an open door down the corridor. She walked in, into what was clearly a guest room since it was too clean and too lifeless to belong to someone from the O'Neil family, and looked around, wondering where Mike could be.

"Mike?" She called out.

Upon hearing steps getting closer, Eleven decided to shut the door behind her. She hoped it wasn't Carl Thomas.

She crossed the bedroom, her eyes going everywhere, trying to understand where Mike was, until she realized there was a closet.

Mike was sitting on the floor, surrounded by boxes, his hands grabbing his head, covering his ears as his eyes were shut and tears fell down his face. Eleven kneeled down in front of him and touched his knee. He didn't react.

"Mike," she called again.

Her boyfriend did nothing, except sobbing quietly.

Eleven stood up, walked deeper into the closet and closed its door. Everything went completely dark. But Eleven felt the space around her and, used to be locked inside dark and close-fitting places, she tapped carefully her way until she felt Mike's body. She sat down next to him and pulled him into a hug.

"It's okay," she murmured.

Mike's shoulders kept shaking, his sobs loud enough for her to hear. And it hurt her. More than see or hear him like this, it hurt her feel his pain as his body was so closed to hers. She felt everything he was feeling.

"It's okay," she said again. "I'm here, Mike. I'm here."

A few hours later, after spending an afternoon socializing with Jonathan Byers and feeling her heart beating like it had never beat before, Nancy Wheeler realized that all kids were in the garden, singing happy birthday to Maria O'Neil, except for her brother and Eleven.

Scared and nervous, she asked Dustin, Will, Lucas and then Max where they were, but none of the kids knew, saying they had lost sight of them hours ago.

Hours ago. Mike and Eleven were last seen hours ago.

Panicking, Nancy walked into the house, followed by Jonathan. They searched the place, trying to keep it quiet so that no one was bothered.

Where did they go? What was happening?

Suddenly, Nancy remembered the glimpse she had of quiet guest, who had kept his distance, standing only by the kitchen's glass door talking to Mrs O'Neil. She had thought that it was impossible, Carl Thomas wasn't there... She wasn't really seeing him... But maybe it had been him. And maybe...

"Over here."

Nancy, who had opened one of the O'Neil's daughters' bedroom,

turned around and walked into the direction that Jonathan's voice came. He was at the guest room, standing by an open closet. Inside of it, Eleven and Mike were sleeping, side by side, using each other's heads as pillows.

10. Part 10

You know, the future's in the hands of you and me

So let's all get together, we can all be free

Karen Wheeler didn't feel like eating breakfast. There was a sick sensation in her stomach as the last sip of orange juice made its way down her throat, despite demanding to leave her body. She kept on rereading the words in the newspaper, while her husband, her stupid mindless husband who never cared about anything, ate his French toast happily.

Her kids... Her sweet kids were shocked with the news as well, Mike looking paler than usual and Nancy, for some reason, staring at her young brother with a worried frown. Holly was an innocent child, unaware of the tense environment in which her family was eating breakfast. For a second, they all wished they could have her innocence.

But no, here they were, reading in the newspaper that Samantha O'Neil had gone missing two days ago, leaving her youngest daughter at school waiting for her. But she never came. And her car was found near Hawkins Middle School. Almost as if she had been on her way to get her daughter, Cecil O'Neil, and then... then something terrible must have happened. And now no one knew where she was.

The newspaper called it what it was, a missing person case. But Karen felt like they were being rude. It wasn't just a missing person case. It couldn't be. There were two small daughters wondering where their mother was... There was her husband...

"Maybe she ran away like the other one," Ted decided to say.

Karen dropped the newspaper on the table loudly and sent her husband a deadly glare.

"How dare you say that? You don't know her life , you-"

“Well, it sounds a lot like the other one, so, Karen, what do you want me to say?”

“She’s good woman,” Nancy talked, sending her father an angry stare. “Mike went to her daughter’s birthday party two Saturdays ago. I was there as well. She loves her family, Dad. She wouldn’t just run away.”

“People said the same thing about the other one.”

“It’s Lucy,” Mike spoke.

Ted Wheeler, who had been about to get a bite of his French Toast, stopped still, his mouth open, shocked. His son had just spoken to him.

“Her name was Lucy Harrington,” Mike stated.

A moment of quietness invaded the Wheeler’s dining room as everyone stared at the only boy in the family.

“Mike,” Nancy called, breaking the silence. Her brother looked at her. “I’ll give you a ride to school today. Keys, Mom?”

“In the hall,” Karen muttered, staring at her son wide-eyed.

She watched as both her kids left the dining-room, then she turned to her husband, who had gone back to eating his breakfast like nothing had happened.

“You didn’t say anything,” she noticed. Ted gave her a weird look. “Your son talked to you and you didn’t say anything.”

“What he said didn’t require an answer.”

“Oh, fuck you, Ted.”

Karen stood up and grabbed Holly before leaving her husband alone at the dining table.

It was eight in the morning and Jim Hopper already had a headache.

He was being bombed with questions and suggestions and more questions, whether from journalists, the O'Neil family, or acquaintances of Samantha O'Neil who thought they had to say something to the chief of police, or he wouldn't do his job right.

"We have to interview everyone in that area, boss." One of the deputies said, referring to the area where Samantha O'Neil's car had been found.

Hopper took a sip from his coffee, remaining quiet.

"Chief?"

Hopper sighed.

"Remember when mornings were for coffee and contemplation?"

His deputies shared a pitiful look. The last time Jim Hopper looked like this and said weird things like this was six years ago, when Lucy Harrington had gone missing.

"What do we do, Chief?"

"What you said we had to do, talk to the people in that area. Perhaps in Hawkins Middle School. She was going to pick up her younger daughter, wasn't she? We talk to the teachers."

Both deputies nodded.

"Then, go."

"And you?"

"Let me drink my coffee and contemplate for a few minutes."

Because something told Jim Hopper that this disappearance was connected to Lucy Harrington's case. And, if that was true, then it was time to talk to Carl Thomas.

Ain't nobody hurt you like I hurt you

But ain't nobody need you like I do

“You don’t seem okay, Nancy,” Jonathan said, concerned.

“Have you read the newspaper?” Nancy asked him.

They were standing by her English class (Jonathan had enrolled at Hawkins High School, filling in the emptiest classes. He share none with Nancy), waiting for Steve to show up. Something told Nancy that he wouldn’t, that he had seen the news and was thrown back into his own past.

“No. What has happened?” Jonathan asked, frowning.

“Samantha O’Neil went missing.”

Jonathan’s eyes went wide-opened.

“Oh God...”

“Yeah... Her car was found near the middle school...” Nancy paused, watching teenagers passed by, and no sign of Steve. “Steve’s mom went missing six years ago.”

Jonathan licked his lips nervously.

“I heard... My mom talked to me about it... Steve’s brother goes to my mom’s sessions.”

Nancy nodded. She saw Barb walking up to them, looking paler than the usual, almost as if she was sick. She probably read the newspaper too.

Jonathan said goodbye, telling them he had to go to Math class, and then the two girls walked into the classroom. Almost all students were there already. But Steve wasn’t going to show up. Nancy just knew that.

She tried to stay focus on the subject, she tried to follow the teacher’s thoughts on the book they had been reading, she really did, but

Nancy just couldn't keep her mind concentrated. Not when there was a woman missing. A woman that last time she had been seen was nearby Hawkins Middle School; the last time that Nancy had seen her was at her daughter's birthday party and Carl Thomas had been there. Nancy had thought it hadn't been him, but her brother confirmed it that, yes, his old English teacher, the murderer of Lucy Harrington, had been there at that party. And now a woman was missing.

How was Mike handling the situation?

Was he okay?

Was he focusing on his studies?

Or was he having a panic attack somewhere?

Nancy closed her notebook. She couldn't sit through an entire English class and be quiet. She grabbed all her stuff quickly, ignoring the teacher's stare, and then stood up and walked out of the classroom without saying a word.

She had to find her brother.

But she didn't know where his class was. Or which one he was having.

Nancy stopped still in the middle of the corridor. She looked around, feeling sort of alone and sad. She felt bad about herself, about her little brother who had gone through too much already and no one had been there for him. Not even his own sister.

She felt like crying. But she wasn't going to because she had to be stronger than that. She had to find her brother.

For some reason, the need to find him was growing stronger and stronger each second that went by. It was like he was in danger if she wasn't with him. She had to protect him.

So, Nancy went to the school's office. She made an emergency up and one of the ladies gave her Mike's schedule.

She didn't know how to react upon opening the door to Mike's Science class. Everyone was staring either at her or Mike, knowing exactly that she was there to get him.

Nancy came up with a quiet and quick emergency, telling Mike's Science teacher that they had to go home because of their youngest sister.

"What is going on?" Mike asked her outside the classroom as she pulled him away from there.

His sister didn't answer and Mike got even more worried. He allowed her to walk them out of the school and take them to the car before he finally demanded an answer.

"Nancy, what's wrong?"

Nancy stared at him quietly, her eye wide-opened in fear. Like she had seen a ghost. Like something bad had happened. And an image popped out in Mike's mind: their mother.

"Is... Is it m-mom? Nancy, is—"

"She's okay."

Mike felt relief invade his body and his shoulders relaxed. He blinked, confused.

"Then, what's wrong?"

Nancy pressed her lips together so she wouldn't cry. Mike's dark eyes were staring at her worried and innocent. Yet, if you looked at him, you wouldn't see a fourteen-year-old, but someone older...Someone who should have been protected but wasn't.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "I was worried about you."

Mike blinked again.

"I—" Nancy took a deep breath. "This all situation... Mrs. O'Neil going missing... It's obvious that—" She stopped talking. "Is it obvious?"

Mike nodded.

“Yeah, it is...”

They went quiet together.

“But Nancy?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m okay.”

Nancy smiled sadly.

“Good.”

And I've been so caught up in my job, didn't see what's going on

And now I know, I'm better sleeping on my own

Carl Thomas felt threatened.

Jim Hopper was sitting across from him, with his hat on his lap and a serious expression in his eyes. Not just serious, accusing. He was trying to accuse him of something and Carl Thomas wasn't enjoying this conversation.

“I don’t get it, Chief Hopper.”

Jim Hopper sighed.

“I’m just asking you if you saw Samantha O’Neil in the previous days.”

“Are you, though?”

Have you perhaps been having what can be considered a personal contact with Samantha O’Neil?, that was the question that the chief of police had asked him. Personal contact.

Like Carl Thomas and Samantha O'Neil had a secret together. Like they were more than they showed to be.

"It's a small town. I may see her once in a while outside school, sure, but that is it."

"That is it," Hopper repeated. "And you always keep a distance from your students' parents, right?"

"Exactly," Carl Thomas answered.

"Even old students?"

There was a frown.

"What do you mean?"

You're a bad man, the words that Mike Wheeler's friend had said to him came back to his mind. Janes Ives. Eleven. The girl who showed up two years ago after being taken away from her abusive family. The girl who got Mike Wheeler to talk again. Karen talked a lot about her; praised her a lot; said she was an angel who saved her son. And two Saturdays ago, she had called him a bad man.

Now, the chief of police was accusing him of something.

It was almost like they knew.

"Mr. Thomas?"

Carl blinked.

"Yes?"

"You haven't answered."

"I'm too offended to do so."

Hopper tried to control a cynical sound which threatened to leave his throat.

"Don't feel offended, please," the chief of police stated politely. But his eyes were telling a different story, almost like contradicting what

his mouth was saying.

There was something fishy going on, Carl Thomas concluded. And he had to figure it out before it was too late and something bad came his way.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you for reading. I know it was a short chapter, but more will come.

11. Part 11

This is going to take a long time

And I wonder what's mine

Karen Wheeler had just finished cleaning the kitchen when the doorbell rang. She frowned, confused, as she dried her hands with an old kitchen cloth. Ted had already gone to bed. He had been pouting all day, like a silly child who didn't get the toy he had wanted for his birthday. Nancy was at Steve's. The boy wasn't doing okay with Samantha O'Neil's situation. It reminded him too much of his mother and he worried about the O'Neil girls and how they might be doing.

Mike was upstairs and Holly was sleeping. Karen had been alone with her thoughts for a while, but now there was something coming to visit them. Weird.

Karen opened the door and didn't hide her surprise when seeing Jim Hopper and Eleven. She blinked, confused, and looked at the watch in her hall. Ten pm. What was happening?

"Hello, Karen," Jim greeted. "Eleven wanted to come pay Mike a visit if it is okay."

"S-sure. He's upstairs, sweetie."

Eleven shot Hopper a glare before smiling politely at Karen and walking up the stairs.

"And I would like to talk to you," Hopper informed her in the moment they found themselves alone.

Karen frowned, worried.

"Sure, Jim. Come in. Do you want a coffee?"

"Oh, no. Not at this hour. I've had too many already. But thank you."

"No problem, Jim," Karen muttered and motioned with her head to the living-room.

They sat next to each other on the sofa. The TV wasn't on. It hadn't been on since before dinner.

"What's wrong, Jim?" She asked.

But Jim remained quiet for a few seconds. He wasn't here as the chief of police, but as a friend, as someone who wanted to protect Karen for something bad. He just was afraid. Afraid that she wouldn't believe. Afraid that she wouldn't keep it in.

What if they were all in danger after he told her the truth?

Mike had begged not to tell.

He hoped the kid would forgive him.

"Karen, I know why Mike stopped talking when he was eight."

Upstairs, in Mike's bedroom, Eleven was distracting her boyfriend with a tight hug. He had been reading a comic book when she walked in and jumped on the bed, pulling him into a hug that had yet finished.

"What's going on?" His voice was muffled against her shoulder.

Eleven pulled back a bit and kissed him softly.

"Nothing."

He frowned.

"Something's wrong."

Eleven shook her head and tried to hug him.

"No." He pushed her back, holding both her hands down. "Tell me."

It took a few seconds for Eleven to answer him. And she did it almost shyly, scared of his reaction.

“Hopper is here.”

Mike stared at her, confused.

“He didn’t just drop you off?”

Eleven shook her head reticently. She should have said the truth right away. But Hopper had asked her not to. He had said it was better if Karen knew first and only then, they should tell Mike that his mother was aware of what was going on since, after, they both could sit down and talk to each other. More privately. More mother-and-son moment.

“Eleven, what are you keeping away from me?” Mike asked in a hurt voice.

And that was when she couldn’t keep the promise she had made to Hopper. Because Mike meant everything and, if he got mad at her, she wouldn’t know what to do.

“Eleven-“

“I’m sorry,” she choked. “Hopper.... Hopper wanted to tell Mrs. Wheeler the truth and-“

“Are you kidding me?!”

Mike tried to get out of the bed, but Eleven pulled him back by his arm.

“Please, let them talk.”

“It’s my life, Eleven!” Mike exclaimed. He felt hurt by her words. She knew what he had gone through. She knew how much it meant to him that his mother was ignorant when it came to his trauma. How could she take the chief’s side on this? “I’m the one that should tell her! And I didn’t want this! Let me go.” But the girl didn’t do it as he asked. Mike stared at her coldly. *“Let me go, Eleven.”*

The hand that had been holding him back suddenly pulled back, almost like if their skin contact had electrocuted her. Mike ran out of his bedroom and down the stairs.

He entered the living-room and stopped still, seeing the chief of police and his mother sitting side by side. They had gone quiet and were now staring at him, Hopper with an angry frown and his mother with tears in her eyes.

It was too late. She already knew too much.

“Mike-“ her voice was weak –“, is it true?”

Behind her son, Karen saw a shy and scared Eleven approaching. The woman let a few tears drop. Even the girl knew the truth before her. Everyone knew.

“Mom-“

“No!” Karen stood up and walked up to her son. She grabbed him by his shoulders and made him look at her. “I’m your mother. I tried to be there for you... Didn’t I- Wasn’t I there for you? Since the beginning? Wasn’t I, Michael?”

Mike nodded scared. He felt his throat close and tears behind his eyes.

“Karen, listen-“

“Shut up, Hopper. How long have you known, huh? Jesus Christ!” She looked back at her son. “Why didn’t you tell me the truth right away? Why didn’t you get in that car that day and told me what had happened? Son...”

“I was scared, Mom,” Mike confessed. “Scared that he would come for you like he... like he came for Troy’s mother.”

Karen’s eyes went wide-opened, tears kept falling.

“Mike-“ But her voice trembled too much and she couldn’t speak.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” Mike said, now crying as well. “I’m sorry.”

They hugged each other.

“S’okay... It’s... okay,” Karen whispered in his ear.

She knew now. She knew and she would protect her son even more.

I might as well take a gun and put it to his head

Get it over with

Carl Thomas had stolen one of the cleaning workers' clothes. It had been easy. Too easy. Hawkins Hospital was lacking serious security facilities.

He took the lift alone, only joined by the cleaning cart he had also stolen. It was three in the morning. The hospital was almost empty, including only the usual small staff that was working the night shift and patients.

He crossed the corridor, looking for the door which would tell him he had arrived at Joyce Byers' office. When he finally did, he tried to open it.

It was locked.

Fuck.

Carl looked around. There was no one else on the floor, except the nurse sitting behind the main desk. He thanked his luck star and walked up to her, leaving the cleaning cart by the office's door.

“Good night, Miss-“ He looked at her name tag –“Summer Shepherdson.”

“Good night.” She sounded suspicious. “What can I do for you?”

Carl acted out as if he was ashamed.

“I’m here to clean Mrs. Joyce Byers’ office... But... I’ve seemed to forget the keys? Or maybe she has forgotten to leave a note? The door is locked...”

It had been obvious to Carl Thomas that Joyce Byers was a good way to find out what was going on around him. Jim Hopper accusing him of something, Jane Ives telling him he was a bad man... Those two people were connected... The chief of police had adopted the girl a few years ago, hadn't he? And, following that stream of thought, then Joyce Byers was also connected to them. She was the girl's psychologist, as well as she was Karen Wheeler's boy's. So, if the girl knew anything about him, then she must have said something to Joyce Byers. And Carl was going to find out what it was.

The nurse stared at him apprehensive. She was a petit, dark-skinned woman with curly hair and big, brown eyes.

"Do I need to call her?"

"At three in the morning? Miss... I... I didn't want to bother Mrs. Joyce Byers... I mean, she might get mad and... losing my job... You understand, right?" Thank God for all the years his mother had made him join the theatre group at school.

The nurse was seriously torn between keeping the office locked since no one had warned her about this and allowing the poor man to go and do his job. She kept staring at him and Carl Thomas knew his good looks were also playing an important part in the game.

"Please, Miss Summer?" He asked sweetly.

The nurse blinked and sighed. She opened one of the desk's drawers and took out a bunch of keys. She stood up and he followed her happily.

"Here," she gave him the keys after opening the office's door. "Give them back in the end, okay?"

"Thank you, Miss Summer." He smiled at her.

The nurse blinked again, briefly confused with her own thoughts, and then walked away.

Carl Thomas played his character even when he was alone in the office. The hospital policy said that in private offices there shouldn't be any cameras, but who knew if Joyce Byers had installed one?

So, he pushed the cleaning cart inside, took out a cloth from one of its compartments and then went to her desk and pretended to clean for a while. He looked around, trying to find something that could help his case, but all she had were pictures of her two sons and a lamp. There was also a small box of paper clips. He looked at it, thoughtful, and then grabbed the box.

He pretended to sneeze and then dropped the box on the floor, behind Joyce Byers' desk.

"Fuck!" He said loudly and then dove in behind the desk.

The box was closed, of course. He made sure it remained closed. But, if there were any cameras, it would just seem like he was a clumsy cleaning worker who had dropped a box of paper clips and they were all scattered around the floor.

Carl checked all the desk's drawers, seeing which ones open and which ones didn't. There was only one that was locked, the bottom drawer on the left side of the desk.

He grabbed the box of paper clips, opened it and took one out. He unbent it, straightening it up. Then, he inserted it in the drawer's hole. It took him a few seconds to successfully open the drawer.

It was filled with small notebooks, all of them positioned in a specific order. Carl read the dates written in the small white papers that had been glued to the notebooks' spines. He took the most recent one out and opened it, finding out that it still had some blank pages to be written. So, this was the one that Joyce Byers was currently using.

He flicked through the notebook quickly, trying to find something useful, like entries about Eleven's private sessions.

Finally, he found one.

1985, November 4th

Eleven has been talking more and more about her family. She admits to still have nightmares about her father. But, overall, she is doing much better. Hopper, as an adoptive father, has been doing a good job. Eleven has friends. She says her favourite is Mike.

Before that, there was:

1985, October 25th

Eleven talked about Mike a lot today. They are good friends. She also talked about school and how much fun she is having.

Carl Thomas kept going back and back, but there was nothing suspicious about the girl. She was just a traumatized kid that had a terrible past and family. She knew nothing about him. Actually, he suddenly realized, she showed up two years ago.... Carl had behaved himself in the past two years... As far as he could remember. So, what was it that made the girl call him a bad man, that made Jim Hopper trying to accuse him of something?

Looking down at the last entry he read of the girl, a word popped out: Mike. Mike Wheeler. The girl talked a lot about him. She spent time with him. He even caught them kissing two Saturdays ago when he showed up at Cecil O'Neil's birthday party.

Was it Mike, then?

Carl Thomas searched for the psychologist's comments on the boy's private sessions. He read each one faster than before since he was running out of time.

Finally, he found something.

1985, October 23th

Mike Wheeler finally talked about his trauma.

Carl looked at that sentence. The psychologist didn't go into detail about the boy's trauma. Why didn't she? Wasn't it her job to record everything about the boy's case?

Something fishy was certainly going on.

Carl put that notebook in its place and took out the first one that Joyce Byers had. He looked for Mike Wheeler's first private session.

1981, September 15th

Mike Wheeler is a ten-year-old boy who has not spoken in two years. Today, I tried to understand what is going on in his mind, but the boy didn't answer to any of my questions. I talked to his mother, Karen Wheeler, and tried to get more information on the boy's past. I tried to date back until the first day he stopped talking. Karen Wheeler gave me a date: 1979, May 29th. According to her, nothing out of normal happen that day, excluding the fact that her son had missed an Arts class and never gave her a good reason why.

The psychologist kept on writing more, occupying an entire page about Mike's case, Carl Thomas had read enough and put down the notebook.

1979, May 29th. The same day Lucy Harrington had gone missing.

How was it possible?

Carl went back into his memories, he tried to remember every detail of that day. The fight he had with Lucy Harrington. How tired she was of their affair. She had accused him of doing the same with every mother on the school. Like every stupid woman was buying their kids' grades with sex. No, that had been just her... Her and a couple more. But Carl had lost his mind that day. She had been a bitch. He couldn't deal with bitches.

Mike Wheeler had been there. But where? Oh, that stupid storage division in the back of the classroom. But Carl had gone there. Why didn't he see the kid?

Carl tried to find an answer in his memories, but nothing came up.

His phone suddenly rang. He took it out and shut off the alarm clock he had put on to stop himself from taking too long.

He put the notebook back at his place and stood up. He left the box of paper clips in its place and left the office as fast as he could. He locked the door and gave the keys to the nurse.

As Carl Thomas walked down the corridor, the anger inside of him started boiling, getting bigger and fiercer. He had been deceived by a kid. By Karen Wheeler's kid. That boy knew some of the truth about

him. He had to do something about it.

As the lift doors opened, Carl felt a smile creep up on his face. Now, he knew what was happening. Now, he knew what he had to do.

Notes for the Chapter:

The story is coming to an end! I'm still not sure how many chapters are left. I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter.

12. Part 12

So I guess the fortune teller's right

I should have seen just what was there

Eleven was alone at home, after having politely refused Karen Wheeler's invitation to go and spend the afternoon and dinner time at her place since Hopper was working late. Eleven had said no right in front of Mike because she was mad at him. He didn't talk to her. Not since what had happened on Tuesday. Not since his mother found out about Carl Thomas' past. They spent time together, yes, no one could deny that Mike Wheeler and Eleven were inseparable. Even mad at each other, they stayed by each other's side. But they weren't in good terms, so no, Eleven didn't want to spend time with him.

It was silly, really. She knew that. She knew that he had overcome the anger he had felt when he realized she had taken Hopper's side and "betrayed" him. But his words had hurt her... The way he had looked at her and demanded her to let him go. Mike had never been like that to her. So, she was mad. And he was mad because she was mad. It was silly.

Eleven stopped by the hall's mirror and took one look at her growing hair. It almost hit her shoulders now and it was curly, just like it used to be. However, under all layers of hair, you would find a small, uneven spot of skin. A scar. A reminder of where she had been and who had hurt her.

Love. Family. Friends. Three concepts she had forgotten until two years ago, when she was saved by her old neighbour. When her father had lit her hair on fire just because she had shyly asked to have it cut.

She had never had a good father. Now she had Hopper, who tried and tried, always hoping he was being good. And he was. He was good enough for her, at least.

She had never had a good mother. Now she looked at Joyce Byers

and felt excitement bubbling inside of her every time the woman showered her with pride and joy.

She had never had friends. Now she looked at Max, Will, Lucas and Dustin and smiled because she understood now what it was like to have friends who supported you.

She had never had love. Not fatherly, not motherly, not brotherly. She had never understood how friends could love each other, let alone imagine someone loving her... loving her like she loved Mike.

It was silly too. She was fourteen. Love had been absent from her life for years. How could she know?

She just did. Because, even mad at each other, Mike and Eleven stayed by each other's side, making sure they were protected.

Echoing through the house, the doorbell rang, scaring Eleven.

She frowned, confused, and looked around, almost hoping that Hopper would show up out of nowhere. He was at work, she had to remind herself. She was alone in the house.

What was she supposed to do, then?

The doorbell rang again.

Eleven took a deep breath and walked up to the door. There was no way to know who was on the other side without opening the door. She was scared, alright. Back at her old home, whenever the doorbell rang, it meant dad's friends had arrived. And when dad's friends were there, then she had to be locked somewhere.

Another ring.

Eleven opened the door and looked up.

"Good night, Jane," Carl Thomas greeted.

But you don't see me standing here

I just came to say goodbye

The phone kept ringing.

Every time Karen Wheeler went to pick it up, the other side hung up. She was getting frustrated. Her husband told her to let it go and not pick it up at all. She told him to go see if it was raining in the neighbour's backyard. They hadn't spoken to each other since then.

Mike had been watching TV alone in the living-room after his mother had gone to the kitchen to bake something out of stress. His sister was still at Steve's house. Or, at least, that was what she would say to their parents. Holly was sleeping and his dad had gone to his study to work.

The phone rang again.

His mother had told him to ignore the phone. It was someone playing a prank.

So, Mike let it ring. His mind went to Eleven and how they had acted towards each other in the previous two days. He had been mean to her – out of despair for what the chief of police was doing behind his back - and she had been mad at him because of that. He understood her side. And he knew she understood his side. But they both childish remained mad at each other. It even cost them an afternoon and dinner together today. Eleven had gone home despite Hopper not being there.

Maybe Mike should call her. Just to make sure she was okay.

The phone started ringing again.

Mike looked at it. He thought of Eleven. Why did he have a feeling he should pick it up?

The phone kept emitting that annoying sound. Mike stood up and walked up to it.

He picked it up.

“Hello?”

“Mike,” Eleven’s voice spoke. “Mike, listen.... I.... I-“

“Are you okay?” He asked her.

“Mike-“

There was a sound on the other side of the phone. Mike frowned, concerned.

Suddenly, another voice spoke.

“Do you want to come out and play, Mike?”

It was Carl Thomas.

Mike didn’t know how to speak. Hearing that voice... Knowing he had Eleven.... Mike felt his breathing accelerating. His body started to shake.

“So, Michael, how is it going to be? I mean, if you don’t want to, then I’ll just play with Eleven.”

“I’ll come out,” Mike answered right away. “I- I just need a few minutes.”

“We’ll be waiting at the end of the street.”

The phone went silent.

Mike put the phone down and stared at it, eyes wide-opened.

He had Eleven.

Of all people, he picked her, Mike’s most vulnerable spot. Mike’s favourite person in the world. The one...

“Mike, who was it on the phone?” Karen Wheeler asked, standing in the living-room’s entrance.

“M-mistake,” he murmured and left the living-room in a hurry.

Karen frowned, confused, as she watched her son climbing the stairs fast. Then, there was a loud bang as he closed his bedroom's door loudly. What was happening?

Mike had to think carefully. What was he supposed to do now?

Well, obviously, he was going to meet them. Staying hidden and protected wasn't an option when that bastard had Eleven. Mike had to go save her.

But how? How could he save her from his biggest fear?

The clock on his bedside table showed him it was half past ten. His mother would only go to bed in an hour and his sister could come home any second. He had to find a way to escape the house without being seen.

Should he go armed? But with what?

So many questions and no answers. Meanwhile, Eleven was stuck with that disgusting monster and Mike had to escape his home to go get Eleven back.

Mike turned to his wardrobe; he opened it and tried to find something to take with him and use it against the man. But all he found were boxes with his old toys, and none of them could be useful. None of them could save Eleven.

What about a knife?

How could he take a knife hidden?

Maybe something sharp... But like what?

A small knife?

Didn't his sister have a small make-up case with weird, pointy things in it?

But maybe there was something better in the kitchen. He just had to find a way to go there without his mother seeing him. He had to have time...

Holly! Holly was already asleep, but what if he woke her up? He could scare her... Holly had been having a few nightmares... His mother would blame them and then stay with her for a while, making sure she had a nice sleep. Mike could have the time to search the kitchen's drawers.

So, Mike left his bedroom, walked past Nancy's quietly and went into his little sister's light yellow bedroom. She was holding her teddy bear in her arms. Mike licked his lips, nervous, apologized almost inaudibly and shook her crazily before running out of the bedroom.

Soon, there were cries in the house and Holly left her bedroom with a mad expression and tears on her face. Mike heard his mother coming up the stairs fast.

"What is it, sweetie? What has happened?"

Holly kept crying and sobbing. She was a six-year-old girl who had too many nightmares for her own good, and Karen worried about her.

Mike, who had hidden himself inside his bedroom, checked the corridor. His mother was closing his little sister's bedroom door. He took the chance and walked down the stairs and went into the kitchen.

He started searching crazily the kitchen's drawers. There were forks, spoons, big knifes, wooden objects, cloths... But nothing helpful. Nothing at all.

She's waiting for you, Mike. Hurry up!, a voice reminded him.

Finally, he opened one last drawer. He looked inside of it, moving random items around until he finally found something that could help them: an old, rusty switchblade.

He kneeled down and managed to hide it inside one of his sneakers. He felt it pressuring his right foot, demanding space. But there was no more space. The switchblade and his foot had to accommodate to each other and Mike had to go get Eleven.

He heard the wood squeak and looked at the kitchen's ceiling. His

mother was walking.

As fast and quietly as he could, Mike grabbed his jacket, which had been hanging in the hall's hanger, and left the house. He ran through his entire front yard and then looked both sides. The street was empty. There were parked cars, but none that-

Suddenly, a car flashed his lights to Mike. He knew it was Carl Thomas.

Gulping and feeling his entire body shake in fear, Mike started walking towards the car.

The man had Eleven. That was why he was doing this. Because Eleven meant everything to him and he couldn't lose her. Not like this. Not to that monster.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm sorry for the delay and for the chapter being so short! I don't have much time these days. I promise to update as soon as possible. I hope you enjoyed it!

13. Part 13

Hold the gun to my head, count 1, 2, 3

If it helps me walk away then it's what I need

Jim Hopper had had a rough day. All he wanted was a glass of water, an aspirin and his bed. And, of course, making sure Eleven had had a good day. Because he was her father now and that was a twenty-four-hour job. The most important one he had.

Samantha O'Neil's case was giving him hell, like all missing cases gave. People – whether random Hawkins citizens or journalists – were always trying to get him, always trying to find something, a mistake, or a hopeful sign that the woman was going to show up. But she hadn't shown up. And people talked and speculated when they shouldn't. Hopper couldn't handle them anymore.

The house was empty. At least, the living-room and the kitchen areas were. Eleven was probably sleeping. It was almost midnight.

Hopper climbed the stairs, taking a glass of water with him, and went to his bedroom to place it down on the bedside table. He changed clothes, putting on his pyjamas (he hadn't worn one in years, but then Eleven came to live with him and Hopper didn't just want to walk around half-naked with a kid in the house). Finally, he went to Eleven's bedroom to check on her.

He opened the door and, downstairs, the doorbell rang.

Hopper frowned. The bedroom was empty.

The doorbell rang again.

He looked at the stairs, his frown deepening. Something was wrong, and it wasn't just his cop-brain telling him so; it was his paternal instincts.

The doorbell kept ringing this time. Whoever it was seemed

distressed. And Hopper was starting to feel the same way. Eleven wasn't home. Where was she?

Maybe it was her at the door.

So, Hopper climbed down the stairs fast and went to open the door.

Karen Wheeler was looking like a crazy woman, standing in front of him. Hopper knew that whatever she was going to tell him wouldn't give his headache peace. Actually, it was going to make everything worse.

"My son is missing."

Hopper stared at her, wide-eyed. He could hear his heart beating in his ears. There was sweat suddenly on his hands. He couldn't talk.

Karen Wheeler stared at the chief of police with tears falling down on her face and her heart beating as fast as it had never beaten. She was waiting for him to do something; to say something! But he kept staring at her pale and open-mouthed.

"Hopp-"

"I heard you," he interrupted her. Then, he looked down, almost as if he was ashamed (but there was no shame on his facial expression), and gulped before saying, "Eleven is missing too."

Karen's hand flew to her mouth as she let out a loud gasp.

"What do—" A sob interrupted her sentence. "To them?"

Jim Hopper shook his head and turned around. He went to his phone. He called the police station and reported two missing kids. Karen Wheeler stood by his doorway crying.

After he hung up, he took one look at Karen and said, "I'm going to get dressed. Then, we'll be out looking for them."

Karen just nodded. She couldn't find her voice. Not since her daughter had finally calmed her down after Karen had realized her son wasn't home. When Nancy had come home, she had found her

mother screaming at the top of her lungs in the middle of the living-room at her husband. Her father, Ted, had been standing in a corner, staring at his wife as if she were crazy, and not replying at all. Of course, Nancy, putting aside her own worries, had taken care of everyone. She had been the one to tell her mother to go and see Chief Hopper. She told her that he would fix everything. That perhaps Eleven would fix everything.

But Eleven was missing too. They both were. Now what?

Hopper came down a few minutes later. He grabbed his car keys and pulled Karen out of the doorway.

“Let’s go to-“

“Nancy and Steve are already looking around,” she started telling. “I think Nancy called Jonathan too.... Joyce might know as well and-“

“Karen,” Jim interrupted her. “Calm down.”

“Calm down?!” Karen stopped walking and stared at the chief of police, angry. “My kid is missing, Hopper! How can I-“ She stopped talking and took a deep breath. “Eleven is missing as well.”

“I know. Don’t you think I’m worried? I am!” Hopper replied. “But panicking won’t take us anywhere near them, will it?”

Karen stared at him, still pissed, but with no answer.

“We have to understand when was the last time and-“ Hopper went quiet. His eyes moved away from Karen and into the dark street. His truck was parked in front of his house, a few steps away from him. Karen’s car was behind his.

“What is it?” Karen asked.

Mike and Eleven would have never run away.

“Mike was home, right?”

“Until an hour ago, yes. I saw him.”

“Eleven was home all day... But... There’s no way to say when...” Hopper frowned. “Did something unusual happen today?”

Karen was about to say no when she froze, remembering something.

“The phone... The phone kept ringing. Every time I went to pick it up, the other person hung up... Then, then Mike picked it up. When I asked him who it had been, he said it was wrong number.”

“Maybe it wasn’t,” Hopper assumed. “Maybe it was Eleven.”

“Why would Eleven-“

“If she was in trouble....” Hopper bit his bottom lip, thinking. But why would Eleven get into trouble? Had it been her parents? Her siblings? No... They didn’t care enough about her to come and kidnap her... Then, who?

“Carl Thomas,” Karen suddenly said.

Hopper looked at her.

“What if.... It was him?”

“But... why? How? What?” Hopper was confused. “Everything we did so far... We never-“His frown deepened. “Maybe we did...”

Hopper walked fast to his truck, got into the driver’s seat and started the engine. Then, he realized Karen hadn’t followed him.

“Come on!”

Karen got into the truck.

“Where are we going?”

“To Carl Thomas’ house.”

‘Cause I know that I failed you

I should’ve done you better

Eleven and Mike were tied up to a wooden pole inside a cabin.

Of course, there was a cabin. And it was dark and it smelled like death; like something had been left there to rot.

Carl Thomas had tied them up and then left to the basement. He was moving around in there. Mike couldn't concentrate in hearing his steps since Eleven was sitting behind him, on the other side of the pole, shaking and sobbing quietly.

"It's okay..." He murmured to her.

"No, it's not," she mumbled back. "It's my fault we're here."

Mike tried to move. He wanted to comfort her, hug her until she was okay.

"No, it's not... This was bound to happen, El... This.... He was going to find out sooner or later that I knew... He-"

Mike went quiet as the lights suddenly turned down. Eleven let out a small gasp, scared. Mike tried to move his arms and find her hands. He managed to grab one of them and hold it tightly.

The floor grinded and Mike almost jumped. His heart was beating fast in fear. They couldn't see anything. It was completely dark. The windows of the cabin were covered with pieces of wood, keeping the light out.

The floor squeaked again. Steps followed it. Heavy steps. Slow and heavy steps. Eleven sobbed. Mike just held her hand strongly.

They felt Carl Thomas approaching them. His breathing was heavy, tired, as if he had been carrying something.

They heard a chair move. They heard something being dropped. Then, steps going away.

The lights came on again.

Eleven screamed and Mike started crying.

In front of them was the dead body of the woman who had gone missing. Samantha O'Neil had been her name. Mother of two girls. A loving wife. A beautiful woman. Dead. With her throat slithered and her eyes wide-opened in coldness and deadness.

Carl Thomas walked up to the chair. He touched Samantha O'Neil's shoulders and then fixed her lifeless hair.

"She was a noisy bitch," he stated with a chuckle. His eyes, almost emotionless if it weren't for the anger inside of them, stared at Eleven, who was sobbing louder than before. Then, he turned to Mike. "You were quiet. So quiet I didn't know..."

Carl Thomas left the corpse behind and approached the two kids. He crouched in front of them. Mike stared at him with tears falling down his face.

"I didn't know you were there. That day... The day that other bitch decided she wanted to be enough for me. You see, Mike, -" Carl Thomas made a move to touch him and Mike flinched. The man chuckled -" women are bitches. And they are going to want to control you, sooner or later. This one here,-" and he pointed at Eleven -"she is going to try and tell you what to do. Every day."

Mike kept staring at him, with no reaction. He didn't understand Carl Thomas' words. He didn't understand why the man was trying to make him sympathise with him and turn him against Eleven.

"But you were quiet," Carl returned to his initial thought as he stood up and went back to the corpse. "And then what happened?" He grabbed Samantha O'Neil's cold face and made it look at them. "You found a girl. Because that's what always happens, isn't it, Mike?"

Mike tried to control a sob. Behind him, Eleven kept crying and shaking her head, trying not to look at the dead body. His hand tightened around hers, trying to give her strength. He had none of his own, but he had to make sure Eleven was okay. It was his fault that they were here, tied up by a psychopath. It was his fault that Eleven got into this mess. Because he had fallen in love with her.

"Now, I wonder, Mike," Carl left the body and went to a small table

near the wooden wall. *Everything was made of wood.* It was a cabin, after all. Why did this thought occur to Mike now? "Now I wonder... What should I do with you two?" He looked at them. "What should I do? Should I kill you, Mike? Should I kill you *both* for being two sneaky kids? Or..." There was a wicked smile on Carl Thomas' face as he raised a knife in front of his face. "Or should I just... play with Jane and make you watch?"

"NO!" Mike shouted. "No, don't touch her!"

Carl Thomas laughed.

"Oh, Mike." He shook his head, almost as if he was disappointed with the boy. "You are much better than this, kid. So much better than... that." And he looked at Eleven with disgust.

The girl, despite her tears and fears, stared at him back, trying to be strong. She had spent her life hearing her own parents saying she was shit. She wouldn't let a psychopath bring her down with that kind of words.

"Shut up," Mike replied angrily. "Don't talk about El like that."

Carl Thomas laughed.

"Oh, *El*, how adorable! Well, kids—"

Suddenly, there was a phone ringing. Carl cursed under his breath, put the knife down and left them inside the cabin with the corpse of Samantha O'Neil. He literally went outside to take the call; pretty sure to keep whoever it was calling him from hearing them.

Eleven let out another sob and Mike closed his eyes, trying to control his fear. He had to get them out of there. If Samantha O'Neil's fate was sealed, theirs wasn't.

"El... El... I have a small knife in my shoe," Mike said quietly, his eyes never leaving the front door of the cabin. He couldn't hear Carl Thomas' voice outside. The man had probably walked to a safe distance to talk on the phone. "I have to... I have to reach it."

"H-how?" El asked.

Mike tried to bring his foot closer to him, but he hadn't much body flexibility. Eleven looked behind her shoulder, confused, trying to understand what he was trying to do.

"He has to untie us," Mike stated, giving up.

"Take your shoe off," Eleven said.

"The switchblade will fall," Mike replied.

"Then you can drag it closer, no?"

Mike nodded and started pushing his sneakers out of his feet. He did both so Carl Thomas wouldn't get suspicious. He could believe Mike had tried to escape, but he wouldn't think he had something inside both his shoes, right?

The switchblade fell on the floor and Mike kicked his shoes away from him. Then, with his right foot, he tried to pull the switchblade closer to him, by bending his knee and pulling his leg closer to his body. The tip of his toe was dragging the knife closer. But not closer enough that Mike could get it.

"It's not working," he said, ready to give up. "I can't reach it."

"Then, hide it."

Mike moved his leg over the switchblade. He felt it under his tight's skin.

The door of the cabin opened. Carl Thomas came back, looking rather displeased.

"Your parents are worried about you." The man approached them fast. He kneed in front of them and grabbed Eleven's face. Mike screamed. "Why the fuck is the chief of police wondering where I am, eh?"

"Let her go!" Mike yelled.

"No, I won't, Mike." Carl turned to the boy. "You know why? Because –"he squeezed Eleven's face between his indicator and thumb,

making her lips come forwards. She was crying –“ Because I’m a bad man, aren’t I, Eleven?”

Eleven sobbed.

“They know, don’t they?” Carl Thomas asked, his eyes never leaving Eleven. But he wasn’t talking to her. “Don’t they, Mike?!”

Mike closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He feared that Carl Thomas would notice his shoeless feet. He feared that the man would move him and find the switchblade. He feared he would hurt Eleven.

“Why do you do it?” Mike asked.

Carl Thomas frowned, confused at the boy’s question.

Eleven let out a small sob.

“Why do you kill those women?”

Carl laughed loudly and stood up. He went back to the corpse he had sat in front of the two kids. He touched Samantha O’Neil’s cold face.

“Because they are all controlling bitches, Mike. Haven’t you been listening?”

Out of blue, Carl Thomas pushed the dead body onto the kids. The woman’s face fell on top of Eleven’s lap. The girl screamed and started shaking.

Mike yelled at the man. “YOU’RE AN ASSHOLE!”

Carl Thomas laughed proudly of his actions.

“Well, sweethearts, now I’m going to go talk to your parents and just... you know, pretend I don’t have a fucking clue where you are.”

He left them all alone with a corpse, closing the cabin’s door loudly behind him. Eleven kept crying and Mike couldn’t move. His eyes were frozen on Samantha O’Neil’s dead body.

They were going to end up the same way, weren’t they?

But you put on quite a show

You really had me goin'

Nancy Wheeler couldn't breathe properly. Not since she had gone home and found her mother freaking out because Mike wasn't there.

Her little brother was missing.

Nancy was sure it was Carl Thomas that had him.

"Where do you want to go next?" Jonathan asked her. He had been driving them around. They had already gone to Carl Thomas' house, but it was empty, to the school, to the library, to the O'Neil's house... Nothing. Mike was nowhere.

"Maybe we should go home," Steve said from the backseat.

Nancy didn't reply. She closed her eyes and tried to pull herself together. She couldn't cry. Not now. She had to find her brother.

"Nancy?" Jonathan called, worried.

She just nodded.

Okay, they would go home. Then, she would call the police station, trying to find out if her mother had gone there already; if Chief Hopper already knew what was happening.

But as soon as she got home, she found out that Jim Hopper was already aware of Mike's disappearing. His truck was parked in front of their house.

Jonathan had barely stopped the car when Nancy opened the passenger's door and ran into her house.

She found the chief of police and her mother in the kitchen. He was using their phone, talking to someone. Her mother was crying, standing by the fridge, a hand covering her face so no one could see

her pain. But it was clear she was in pain.

“Mom.”

Karen looked up.

Nancy stared at her, worried. Jonathan and Steve showed up, looked at both grown-ups and then at Nancy.

“Eleven is missing too,” Karen informed them.

Nancy’s eyes went to Jim Hopper who kept arguing on the phone with someone.

“Holy shit,” Jonathan murmured.

“Is it... Is it him that has them?” Nancy asked.

Karen shrugged.

“We went to his house... Jim has called him... He said he was out on a walk, that he would come by to talk to us...”

“He is coming here?!”

“It’s better that way,” Hopper suddenly intervened, putting the phone away. “If we get him here, maybe...”

“Maybe he’ll never tell us where they are!”

“He doesn’t have to,” Jim said. “He only has to let us follow him.”

Nancy frowned.

“You are going to chase him into where he has Mike and Eleven,” Steve realized.

Hopper nodded.

“That’s the plan.”

“What if he never shows up?” Nancy asked.

Karen stepped away from the fridge and walked to her daughter.

“Why wouldn’t he?”

Nancy shrugged.

“I don’t know. I don’t know how a psychopath thinks.”

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door.

There was a moment in which no one moved. They just stared at the door. It was Carl Thomas on the other side, they were sure of it. But now what?

“You three –” Hopper started, pointing at the teenagers – “Go upstairs. We don’t want to make him feel crowded.”

Both boys nodded, but Nancy kept staring at Hopper, now angry.

“He has my brother.”

“And we’ll get your brother. But he can’t know that we think that.”

“Nancy.” Jonathan touched her arm. “Come on.”

They left.

Hopper then took a deep breath, looked at Karen and nodded. The woman went to open the door, her heart beating fast and her hands shaking. She was about to face a killer, the man that had kidnapped her son.

She had to be strong. She had to play her part.

The door was opened.

Ted Wheeler stared at his wife, upset.

Karen blinked.

“I forgot my keys,” her husband stated.

Karen looked behind her shoulder, to where Hopper was standing,

open-mouthed. None of them were expecting to see Ted. Ted, the man who had not given a fuck about his son's missing case. Ted, who had left the house when his older daughter arrived. Ted, her useless husband who had never been on her side, who had pretended his son didn't exist for years, who-

"ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME, TED?" Karen lost it. "WHERE WERE YOU?"

Ted didn't reply. He tried to enter the house, but Karen half-closed the door.

"Karen-"

"Our son is missing, and you fucking left!"

The wooden stairs suddenly squeaked. Hopper saw the three teenagers coming down again. Nancy stopped, seeing her father and mother arguing on the door.

"I had to think!" Ted exclaimed.

"ABOUT WHAT? Oh my God, Ted, honestly!" Karen shook her head, tears falling down her face. "Your son goes missing and you go take a walk!"

"Karen, come on, you know how I am with grief."

"GRIEF?" Karen's eyes went wide-opened. "Did you—" She bit her bottom lip, trying to control herself. "Are you assuming your son is dead?"

"You're a piece of shit," Nancy stated, trying to move closer to her parents. Jonathan pulled her back.

"I'm not—" Ted shook his head. "I'm just saying that—"

"I want the divorce, Ted," Karen said and closed the door in his face.

Notes for the Chapter:

I hope you've enjoyed it. Only two chapters to go!

Sorry if there are any grammar mistakes!

14. Part 14

And so long to devotion

You taught me everything I know

Eleven had finally managed to push the dead woman's head away from her lap. Then, she had closed her eyes and tried to control her breathing.

Mike went back to finding a way to get to the switchblade. He now moved his body, dragging it as closer as he could to the pole, making the switchblade move. But it wasn't close enough, and his hands couldn't reach it.

Frustrated, he looked at the space near them, trying to understand if there was anything he could use to set them free. He had to do something for them. If Eleven was living this nightmare, it was because of him.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much to be used. On their right side, there was a wooden wall from the cabin with only a lightbulb turned on, and on their left, there was the dead body and the chair. And they couldn't even reach the chair.

"Can we use the body?" Eleven suddenly asked.

Mike was surprised for a second.

"I don't know..." Mike tried to move his hands, and felt Eleven's cold fingers touch him. "Are you okay?"

He felt her shake her head.

"No, but I want to get out of here."

They both went quiet. They were running out of options on how to escape. When Carl Thomas came back, he would kill them.

What if he kills my mom?, the thought stormed into Mike's mind and

he felt like crying.

“What if we move around the pole?” Eleven asked. “Maybe we- Wait, let’s stand up!”

“W-what?” Mike asked confused. Then, he moved his hands and noticed that, despite being very tightened around his and Eleven’s wrists, it went up and down.

Eleven nodded confidently, and he agreed. Synchronized, they both stood up. With his foot, Mike managed to drag the switchable to the pole. Then, they sat down again.

Mike grabbed the switchblade.

“You have to help me open it,” he said to Eleven.

She nodded.

Together, despite all the clumsiness, they managed to open the switchblade. Finally, Mike felt some sort of relief. Looking behind his shoulder as best as he could, he started cutting the rope.

“Don’t cut me,” Eleven asked softly.

“Promise I won’t.”

For the first time, she managed to smile that night.

“It’s hard to cut it when I can’t see it,” Mike complained. He was moving the sharp tip carefully because he couldn’t see where the rope ended and where their skin began. He could feel the knife almost touching something soft as it cut down the rope.

“Mike?”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t want to die mad at you.”

Mike stopped still. He looked behind his shoulder at her.

“Are you mad at me?” He asked, worried.

“Are you?”

“I’m not,” he replied.

Eleven shook her head.

“Don’t say that because we’re trapped in a cabin waiting to die.”

“El,” Mike tried to call her attention. “I’m not saying it because of that. I mean it.”

“Then, what happened in the last few days? You barely talked to me.”

“We barely talked to each other,” he corrected her.

Eleven puffed.

“Because you started it,” she replied harshly. Too harshly. She hadn’t meant to. “Sorry.”

Mike shook his head and went back to cutting the rope.

“It’s okay. I was mad, yes. But not anymore... I... I felt betrayed at first, El. You... you’re my partner. In everything,” he murmured the last part. She wasn’t just his partner in everything. She was everything.

How could it be?

They were only fourteen.

“Mike, I-”

Finally, the rope broke. They felt the pressure leaving their wrists and moved away from the pole, almost as if it had started burning. They took one look at each other and a small smile appeared on their faces. Yet, there was fear. Fear that Carl Thomas would return and would finish the job.

“Mike, I-“ Eleven gulped.

“What is it?” Mike asked worried and approached her on his knees.

He touched her face. “What is it?” He repeated the question.

She had to do it now. She had to say it now. There was still a chance something bad would happen... Mike needed to know that-

“I love you.”

Mike blinked.

“R-really?”

Eleven nodded. Then, almost unconsciously, they started to raise to their feet. Mike grabbed her hands.

“I love you too.”

In front of Samantha O’Neil’s dead eyes, they kissed.

I bow down to pray

I try to make the worst seem better

Carl Thomas was feeling observed. Karen Wheeler was staring at him with eyes of an angry mother who knew he had hurt her son. Her precious son.

“You went for a walk, so?” Hopper tried to confirm.

Putting on his façade, Carl sighed and nodded.

“As I’ve said, yes. That’s why I was not home. I like to walk in the woods sometimes.”

“Why?” Karen asked.

Hopper sent her a glare.

“I just do. Why do you like baking so much?”

Karen blinked.

How did he know she liked baking?

“If that is all,” Carl started to get up, “then I guess I can go?”

The chief of police nodded reluctantly.

“Please keep in touch, in case... you see the kids,” Hopper asked.

Carl Thomas forced a smile.

“Sure thing, Chief.”

Upstairs, Nancy Wheeler couldn’t stop pacing in front of her bed. Steve and Jonathan kept watching her go and come, muttering something under her breath that they couldn’t catch. Once in a while, she would stop in front of her bedroom’s door, almost as if she was about to go out and confront the man downstairs. In those moments, Steve and Jonathan would share a worried look.

“Hopper is taking care of everything, Nancy,” Steve said. He looked pale tonight, since Nancy had called in, asking for his help to find her brother. It was like reliving good, old days when his father would go out looking for his missing wife. For Lucy Harrington. She never showed up.

Maybe now she would... If they got Carl Thomas to confess...

“Do you think he still knows?” Steve wondered out loud.

Jonathan looked at him, confused. Nancy stopped moving.

“What?”

“Where my mom is buried.”

Jonathan looked at Nancy, asking with his eyes for her to talk. He didn’t know what to reply to the boy next to him, but Nancy had been his girlfriend. She knew him better.

Steve suddenly shook his head.

“Never mind.”

Suddenly, the bedroom's door opened. Hopper took one look at the teenagers before saying, "Let's go."

Of course, Carl Thomas knew they would follow him.

Looking through his rear-view mirror, he saw Karen Wheeler's car trying to keep a safe distance between them. There was also another car behind hers. He wondered if it was following him as well.

He liked to be chased. It was fun. Because he knew he was smarter than his hunters. He had been on this game for too long to be caught by a silly small town chief of police and a desperate mother.

It all started out when he was sixteen. He murdered his mother. His annoying-always-yelling-at-him mother. That bitch. She thought she could control him. But no one could. So, he told her so and showed her that he was an independent man who no woman could gain power. He killed her and dropped her body into a lake. No one had ever found the body. Or, if they had, they didn't remember her sweet old boy Carl who left the city right after she went missing.

Then, there was his college girlfriend... Another noisy bitch who wanted to know everything he was doing. No, no. That was not how Carl Thomas lived.

After he had finished college, Carl Thomas finally put an end to this noisy girlfriend. Then, he moved away from the big city and went to look for jobs in small towns. He was in two different cities before being transferred to Hawkins.

He loved Hawkins. All mothers were in love with them, and most didn't bother him with their bitchness.... No, they knew their places.

Carl turned right on the street in which he lived. He parked his car in front of his house and looked through the rear-view mirror again. No car had turned after him. He either had lost them or they realized he was going home and not after their missing kids. Carl chuckled. Those innocent people.

He went into his small house. There was barely any decoration in it, just the most basic furniture. Carl Thomas didn't know how to get

attached to things, or people. He was only attached to himself and to getting what he wanted.

He waited patiently for around forty-five minutes, sitting on his sofa with his TV turned on, but on mute, keeping an eye on the window to see if any car lights would show up. He was certain he was safe, but you never knew you was watching...

Finally, he turned his TV off, stood up and left the house. He walked for a while, to where he had left his old truck near the woods.

He should have known something was off with that Wheeler kid right when he stopped talking. It had not been a coincidence, despite Carl Thomas believe it had for years, that Wheeler got traumatized with something in the same day he had killed off that Harrington bitch. That woman... Why did she have to go and ask for more? What they had had been perfect...

Carl Thomas shook his head and got into the truck. He would not dwell on the past.

He drove around for a while, always within the speed limit, with his radio turned off, so he wouldn't get distracted, and his car lights on, so he could see the road ahead. He was also making sure no one was following him.

It would take him around thirty minutes to get to the cabin. Carl knew what he was going to do to those two brats... Mike Wheeler kept in silence for so many years, but then... then that girl showed up and he decided to talk. So, he was going to Mike Wheeler suffer. And, no, he was not going to touch him or hurt him physically. Not for now, at least... Carl was going to torture the girl. And Mike Wheeler would watch. Even if he didn't want to, he would. And he would scream and beg for Carl to stop, but he wouldn't. Carl had always got away with everything, and this boy... this stupid boy who fell in love with a weird girl decided to come and ruin everything for him. Carl would ruin everything for him too.

Suddenly, Carl's eyes focused on something at the edge of the road.

He frowned, the lights barely lightning what it was, but he knew

what it was. He stopped the truck and got out. He started walking towards the two figures standing by the road.

Mike Wheeler and Jane Ives finally realized who was coming their way and ran into the woods.

Carl cursed and ran after them.

They escaped?! How did those two brats escape?!

Carl could see them, like two scared rabbits jumping and running as fast as they could through the bushes and the trees. But Carl was getting onto them, especially the girl who ran slower than the Wheeler boy.

He was almost grabbing the girl's jacket when suddenly he noticed Mike Wheeler turning around and running right to him. He pushed him and threw him onto the floor.

"Run, El!" Mike yelled and the girl did so.

He was about to follow her, but Carl grabbed his ankle. Mike tripped and fell on his face, his chin made a terrible sound when hitting a rock. The boy cried a bit. Carl stood up and grabbed him.

"Call for her," he demanded, his arm going around the boy's neck.

The girl had not noticed that Mike had stayed behind.

"N-no," Mike cried.

"Call for her or her death will be more painful than-"

"Just kill me," Mike begged. "Leave her alone, please."

Carl Thomas's grip over Mike's neck tightened. The boy started choking for air.

"*Call for her*," he demanded one more time.

Mike gulped.

"EL! EL!" Mike started shouting.

Carl Thomas smiled triumphant. He would get them both.

Then, out of blue, the Wheeler kid changed his shouting words, “DON’T COME NEAR, EL. PLEASE, DON’T! I’LL BE- Humph”

Carl hit the boy’s head and he whimpered.

“You stupid brat, you-“Carl dropped Mike onto the floor and kicked him in the stomach. The boy whimpered. “You’ll regret ever have lived, boy, I promised you that.”

And then he hit him in the head again, but this time stronger and more violent. Mike blacked out.

I keep losing you

Like a fire always burning

“What’s our plan now?” Nancy demanded to know.

Jim Hopper sighed and took a glance at Karen Wheeler, who was still inside his truck crying quietly. He shook his head.

“I don’t know, kids.”

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU-“

“Nancy,” Jonathan called out and grabbed her arm. “Take it easy.”

“WE HAD HIM!” She shouted.

“Well, there’s not much we can do when he fuckin’ goes into the woods and comes out with a fucking car!” Hopper replied.

They had followed Carl Thomas on foot after he had left his house. He knew Carl Thomas was going to try and lose them, go home and pretend for a while that he was an innocent man. But he had the kids and he had to go check on them sooner or later. When Hopper saw him leaving the house on foot, he decided to follow him like that. If

he had gone on his truck, Carl Thomas would notice it right away. On foot, they would be safer and unseen. But they had not expected Carl to get into a truck. There wasn't much they could do then.

They did try to go back to the cars and go into the direction he had gone. But they lost complete track of him.

Now, they were standing in the middle of an empty and dark road. Karen Wheeler had started crying a while ago and hadn't stopped. Steve looked like he was going to pass away any second. Jonathan Byers was getting worried about his mother and wanted to go home. And Nancy... Nancy looked like a crazy woman, ready to kill someone.

"What do we do now, chief?" Nancy asked, crossing her arms, pissed off.

"Now we pray," Steve said out of blue.

Everyone looked at him, open-mouthed. He looked even paler than before.

"Now we pray we see them again," Steve added with a sad tone of voice.

You taught me the courage of stars before you left.

How light carries on endlessly, even after death.

Mike started to come to himself. He blinked a few times, dizzy, trying to adjust his eyes to the weak light inside the cabin.

The cabin.

Shit. He was back in it.

He sat up carefully, rubbed his head and felt something wet on his fingers. He took one look at them. Blood.

“Don’t worry,” Carl’s voice came from behind him, “you’ll be bleeding much more when I’m done with you.”

For some reason, Mike found himself half-smiling.

“It’s okay,” the boy replied in a rough voice. “As long as you don’t get El.”

He heard Carl Thomas’ steps approaching him. He looked up and saw the man staring at him with psychopath eyes and a hammer on his hand. Mike then looked around. He noticed that, for some reason, the man had not turned the lights on, but there were just a few candles lighted up around the cabin. Why?

Of course, to keep us hidden, Mike suddenly realized. So, El wouldn’t find the cabin so easily. Electric bulbs gave away much more light than candles. With the windows closed, it was almost like the cabin was abandoned. She was probably lost in the woods.

Mike felt tears in his eyes.

He was going to die and El was lost in the woods.

He prayed someone would find her.

“What are you thinking about, boy?” Carl Thomas asked.

“Eleven,” Mike replied and looked up at the man again. “I love her.”

Carl Thomas snorted and shook his head.

“You boys... You don’t get how controlling they are, you don’t see how they manipulate you into being who they want you to be.”

Mike took a quick look around the cabin again. The closest candle was near a table in the centre of the room. He could get there before Carl grabbed him if he wasn’t so dizzy. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“Now, I think it’s time for us to-“

There was a knock on the door.

Both Mike and Carl Thomas looked at it suspicious. Carl frowned, grabbed the hammer firmly around his hand and walked up to the door slowly. Mike's heart was beating fast. His mouth was dry, he finally noticed; his tongue demanded water and his throat felt raspy.

He saw how his old English teacher grabbed the door's knob and took a second before deciding to open it.

It all happened so fast.

Eleven crashed into the man, sending him to the floor and then ran into a hidden corner.

"That little bi—"Carl stood up and looked around like a crazy man, trying to find her. Then, he remembered Mike. He pointed the hammer at him. "I'm going to finish you and she is going to watch."

Mike's eyes went wide-opened. When Carl took one step into his direction, the boy reacted and turned around, standing up. He ran to the nearest candle. He grabbed it, felt its hotness around his hand burning him, and threw it in the man's direction. The candle fell on the wooden floor.

Carl put it out fast and chuckled.

"Oh, you thought you could—"

Suddenly, more candles flew onto the floor. Together, they started to burn floor. The melting wax helped it spread.

Carl Thomas started looking around, trying to find Eleven. Mike took the chance to run and find more candles to throw to the floor. To his surprise, he found an old, dusty bottle of whiskey next to where one of the candles had been. He grabbed it, aimed it to the small fire and, just before he heard Carl Thomas scream, he threw it.

A big flame exploded inside the cabin. Carl tried to cover his face with his hands.

Mike started to cough with the sudden smoke. He looked around, trying to figure out where to run and where Eleven could be.

He had to save her.

Abruptly, he was thrown onto the floor. A heavy weight laid down on top of him. Mike's eyes were crying because of the smoke, but he could see clearly how Carl Thomas was raising the hammer above his head and getting ready to smash his head with it.

"Say goodbye to your girlfrie-Humpfh!" Something hit Carl Thomas on the head and he fell over the floor, next to Mike.

Eleven stood in front of them with another hammer on her hands. Breathing loudly, she took one look at Mike, heard Carl Thomas' groaning, and reacted, aiming the hammer to the man's head. She did it once, twice. Blood started to spread out everywhere.

Eleven cried and suddenly stopped hitting him.

Mike stood up. She backed away from him and dropped the hammer.

Mike grabbed her by the shoulders.

"El, El, it's okay, El, look at me." Mike touched her face. The girl kept crying and shaking her head. There were drops of blood running down her face. "El, listen—"

There was a sudden groan coming from the floor. Scared, they saw Carl Thomas move his hand slowly.

Eleven froze on the spot. She couldn't believe he was still alive.

He is the devil.

Carl Thomas groaned again.

Mike reacted, saying to himself *no, you're not going to get Eleven too*, grabbed the hammer again and started hitting the man.

He hit him three times. One for Lucy Harrington. One for Samantha O'Neil. And one for Eleven.

Then, he stared at man. His old English teacher, his most dreadful nightmare, the thing he feared the most for years, a killer... A man

who had killed innocent women, who would keep killing women if he was still alive.

But he wasn't. There was no sign of life in Carl Thomas' body. Mike dropped the hammer.

Eleven grabbed his hand. They shared one look.

Behind them, the fire grew bigger.

I met you in the dark, you lit me up

You made me feel as though I was enough

Jim Hopper had been giving Karen Wheeler a cup of tea when one of the police officers burst into his office and gave the news that there was a fire in the woods.

“How big is it?” Hopper asked, frowning.

“We don’t know yet. The firefighters are on their way. We have to go, sir.”

Jim looked at Karen. She put down the tea and stood up.

“I want to go too.”

He frowned.

“Why?”

“If there’s any chance Mike is there-“

“Karen, it’s a fire.”

“In the woods,” she reminded him. “Where we lost Carl Thomas.”

Jim Hopper sighed.

“Let’s go.”

Taking Karen Wheeler in the truck with him, he drove to the place where the fire was happening. They arrived at the scene as fast as they could, followed by two more police cars.

Jim Hopper parked the car abruptly and stared wide-eyed at the scene in front of him. The firefighters had just arrived as well. Some were unrolling the hose and others were covering the perimeter, making sure no one was inside.

“Oh my,” Karen Wheeler let out.

It was a cabin on fire. There wasn’t much left of it. But that was not the most shocking part. Right in front of Hopper’s truck, Mike and Eleven stood still, staring at the fire. They were holding hands.

Karen left the truck and ran to her son. She dropped to her knees in front of him, saw the blood on his face and started to cry. She hugged him.

Hopper approached Eleven. He touched her shoulder. She looked up at him and blinked.

“He’s dead,” she said.

Karen looked at the girl, open-mouthed.

Mike nodded slowly.

“He’s dead,” he repeated.

“Did the—” Hopper cleared his throat. “Was it the fire that killed him?”

Neither Mike nor Eleven answered.

A couple of police officers approached Hopper, saying there was an ambulance on the way to take care of the kids. Hopper nodded, thanking them.

Mike and Eleven were taken to the hospital shortly after the ambulance arrived. Mike had a wound on his head and a burn on his hand, but Eleven seemed okay. The blood on her face wasn’t hers.

Hopper stood by the waiting room's door, impatient. Sitting on the chairs, there were Karen Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Jonathan, Steve, and Joyce Byers, who had joined them a while ago. She had left Will at home. She did not want to bother her youngest son with all this drama.

"Is he really dead?" She had asked Hopper, and he had nodded.
"What killed him?"

"We don't know yet," Hopper replied, almost lying. He was pretty sure he knew what had killed Carl Thomas. Or better, who.

What could he do now?

The firefighters had found the burned body of Carl Thomas inside the cabin. It had been taken to autopsy. Hopper knew it would reveal the cause of death, and fire wouldn't be it.

What could he do?

Finally, a nurse came out, calling for Mike Wheeler and Jane Ives' families. She said they were both okay, recovering, in the same room. They had asked to be in the same room.

"Can we go see them?" Nancy questioned, nervous.

"Just three people, please," the nurse said politely.

"Mom," Nancy touched Karen's sleeve, "please, can I go with you?"

She nodded. Hopper went as well.

Arriving at the room both kids were staying in, they noticed how one of them had left their bed – the sheets were untangled - and was lying down next to the other.

Mike had a bandage on his head and another in his hand. They had both taken a shower and all blood there had been on their faces was gone.

"Hey." Nancy was the first to get the guts to greet them. "How are you feeling?"

Mike looked at Eleven before shrugging.

“We’re okay,” the girl murmured, leaning her head on Mike’s shoulder.

“Yeah? You’ll be home soon,” Nancy replied and smiled.

Mike just stared at her until he made her feel nervous. Nancy looked at her mother.

“You should go outside,” Karen advised her.

Nancy bit her bottom lip, unsure of what to do. She didn’t want to leave her little brother, but something told her that she shouldn’t be here for now.

Reluctantly, she left.

When the door was closed, Hopper turned to the two kids.

“We’ll see it was self-defence,” he informed them.

The kids stared at him.

“Hopper,” Karen started, shaking her head, “we shouldn’t be talking about this now.”

“We need to have everything sorted before the autopsy is revealed, Karen.”

“But-“

“We killed him,” Mike confessed.

“But he was going to kill us,” Eleven added.

Hopper nodded.

“Self-defence, it is.”

Notes for the Chapter:

It is finally done! I’ll be posting an epilogue in a few

days, but the story is basically told. I hope you guys enjoyed it. For any grammar mistakes, I'm sorry.

15. Epilogue

11 months later

There had been no trial for Mike Wheeler and Jane Ives' charge of possible manslaughter. To be completely honest, there wasn't much of an accusation on the kids. Everything was done between the police and the court without having to bother the two kids who went on with their lives and school.

Carl Thomas, despite dead, was labelled a murderer and his story filled all Hawkins' newspapers for weeks. His house was searched and evidence that he had murdered, at least, five women, were found: the man kept a small album with newspaper articles about five missing cases, one of them being his mother's. No one went to his funeral, except Hopper and Karen Wheeler. They wanted to see the man go under soil and stay there.

Joyce Byers's therapy group for kids became an even bigger success after the public discovered that it had been thanks to her that Mike Wheeler, the boy who had been traumatized by Carl Thomas' murderous acts at the age of eight, grew better and finally confessed what he had seen all those years ago. Joyce took all the credits, not wanting to turn the public's attention towards Eleven. She had been the one that made Mike better.

Eleven months after the fire in the cabin and the death of Carl Thomas, Eleven turned fifteen and all the kids were invited to celebrate it at Benny's diner. They all arrived around seven pm for dinner. Hopper would pay for all their meals when he came to pick them up. Then, she and Max would have a sleepover while the boys would go the Mike's.

"So, two cheeseburgers, one burger with extra-bacon, two classic Benny's burgers and one burger, with no mustard or ketchup, right?" Nancy, as their waitress, confirmed.

Mike nodded at his sister and she smiled at him before leaving their table. He then looked at Eleven, who was sitting next to him,

admiring all their friends.

Max and Dustin, after months and months of kissing each other and saying they were just friends, decided to actually just be friends, having lost their feeling of one another. Will, they found out a couple weeks earlier, was infatuated with a girl called Anna, and Lucas had decided he wanted to be a cop when he grew up.

Mike and Eleven still were Mike and Eleven. They did not know where they were heading with their lives, despite talking about it occasionally. All they knew is that they would have each other. And that no bad man was waiting for them at a street corner. They were safe.

Of course, there still were nightmares. Nightmares about a man with a hammer. About a man violent enough that he was capable of murdering everyone that stood in his way. About two kids who ran and ran and could not escape. But they were less and less as time went by. Karen Wheeler and Jim Hopper, at first, didn't quite understand how to deal with their kids' nightmares, until, one night, they realized that they needed to be together. So, sleepovers between Mike and Eleven were weekly common now.

Mike never went back to be talkative boy he once had been. He was quieter, more careful with his words and always paying attention to those surrounding him. He paid the most attention to El.

They had both faced something that no one else had. No one, but the two of them, understood what had happened in that cabin. How killing Carl Thomas had not only been a need, but a desire. They had wanted him dead; had wanted him gone forever. It hadn't been the social need to get rid of a murderer, nor their self-survival instincts kicking in. The latter had been there, but joined in by a desire to murder the man.

Sometimes Mike thought his mother knew about the existence of that desire. It was gone now since Carl Thomas was dead, but Mike was sure his mother sometimes would look at him and wonder about her son and who he was now. His only fear was that she thought the same of Eleven.

Eleven was pure. She had been there because of him. He was at fault in everything, wasn't he?

People could point their fingers at him, but not at El. Never at her.

"You're overthinking."

Mike blinked.

They were outside Benny's now, having eaten their burgers and dessert. They were waiting for Karen Wheeler to come pick the boys up and for Hopper to come and pay for the meal, and then take the girls home.

"I am?" He asked.

Eleven nodded and grabbed his hand, intertwining their fingers.

"Don't overthink the past, Mike."

He tried to smile at her. Behind them Lucas and Dustin were getting into a fight about Star Wars' characters, Will was letting out a yawn and Max was just rolling her eyes at the boys.

"I promise I'm trying," he whispered.

Eleven stepped closer to him and leaned up to kiss him softly.

"You guys are disgusting," Lucas's voice echoed from where he was trapped under Dustin's arm.

Mike blushed and Eleven stared at Lucas until he apologized.

"Jesus, it was a joke, you two."

Finally, Hopper's truck stopped in front of them, followed by Karen Wheeler's car.

Karen Wheeler had divorced Ted Wheeler officially one month ago. It had been a long, yet an effortless process, since Ted agreed with almost everything Karen demanded. She had kept the house, her three children's custody and got a monthly pension for each of them

until they finished their studies. Ted had moved away from Hawkins after it, being transferred somewhere else. After the divorced was concluded, Karen Wheeler put their house to sell. A man came and bought it two weeks later. He was moving into it in a month. Karen was spending her afternoons with her older daughter and Joyce Byers packing everything they needed and throwing away everything that was useless.

Now, the Wheelers lived two houses away from Hopper, having found a small, three-bedroom house with two bathrooms and a lovely kitchen. The house had also a study which Karen turned into a small bedroom to her younger daughter, Holly.

“Okay, boys,” Karen Wheeler said, stopping the four teenage boys from escaping to Mike’s room, “you get to stay up until two am, deal?”

All four nodded.

“Thank you, Mom,” Mike said quietly.

Karen smiled softly at him.

Nancy was home, in the kitchen, sharing a box of ice cream with Jonathan and Steve. Karen looked surprised at them.

“I was not expecting to see you two here,” she remarked.

Nancy licked her spoon before saying, “I was bored.”

Karen sighed.

“Alright. I’m going to bed.”

Karen didn’t understand what the deal was between her daughter, Jonathan and Steve actually was. Sometimes, it seemed like they were all in a big relationship, dating each other, caring about each other... At least, Nancy was happy. Karen only wanted her kids to be happy.

Passing by her son’s bedroom, she heard the boys laughing quietly. She sighed in relief.

Mike was happy.

After spending years worrying almost every minute with her son's well-being, Karen Wheeler could finally rest. His nightmare was gone. Mike was not the boy he used to be, but that was okay. He was enough for her. He was her son.

"Mom?"

Karen, who had been sitting on her bed, after taking off her shoes, lost in thoughts, raised her head and saw her son standing by her bedroom's entrance. She smiled kindly at him.

"Come in, sweetie."

Mike did so, leaving the door behind him closed. He sat down next to her on the bed.

"Is something wrong?" She asked, touching his soft dark hair.

Mike didn't speak at first. There was a moment in which Karen's heart beat fast, scared, wondering if her son would not answer at all, just like in the old days.

But then, Mike spoke, "Do you think I'm good?"

Karen blinked.

"What- I- Of course, Michael. Why would you ask me that?"

Mike shrugged nonchalantly.

"Michael," Karen called. He didn't look at her. That panicking feeling arose inside her heart again. "Please look at me."

He did.

"And talk to me."

Mike opened his mouth, no sound coming out of it at first. Then, he said, "I think I'm a bad person."

"Why do you think that, sweetie?"

“Because I killed him.”

Karen blinked.

She stroked her son’s cheekbone.

“It was self-defence,” she reminded him.

“One strike is self-defence, Mom.”

Karen frowned.

“Michael, he was a bad man. He’s better off dead.”

Mike looked at his mother quietly.

“Okay?”

He nodded.

“And I,” Karen continued, sliding closer to her son, “I love you. You’re my son. Okay?”

Mike nodded again and hugged his mother, hiding his tears from her.

A few houses down the street, Eleven had left Max in her bedroom and had gone to the kitchen to get a glass of water.

She found her stepdad drinking a cup of coffee, sitting at their dining table.

“You shouldn’t drink coffee at this time of the night,” Eleven told him as she filled a glass with tap water.

Jim Hopper chuckled softly.

“Don’t worry, kid, this shit doesn’t work on me anymore. If I get to bed, I’ll sleep right away.”

Eleven smiled sat her guardian and drank her water.

Jim looked over at the fifteen-year-old who was now his daughter.

“Are you happy?” He asked her.

Eleven cleaned her mouth with her pyjamas’ sleeve and nodded.

“Of course.”

5 years later

They were no longer kids.

Mike Wheeler had got into University of Michigan and was now studying Engineering. He was one of the brightest students in the course, although also one of the quietest. He never missed classes, nor was late. He always delivered his projects and essays on time. He never got a B. He had a full scholarship and a very proud mom back in Hawkins. He lived with his girlfriend of six years (which surprised a lot of people) in a small flat near the university. You’d never see him on the weekends. Weekends were dedicated to his girlfriend.

Janes Ives, now known as Jane Hopper, was also attending University of Michigan, but studying Speech Therapy. She was a bright young lady, with a grand future ahead of her. Eleven, as her classmates came to know her, never missed her classes, nor was she late. She always delivered her written papers on time, and she never got a B. She had a full scholarship and a very proud guardian back in Hawkins. She lived with her boyfriend in a small, adorable flat near the university (which made a lot of her classmates jealous). She spent her Saturdays with her boyfriend, most likely laying around the flat or cleaning it. On Sundays, you’d find them walking around the city.

They were a happy couple, most people would tell you. And they wouldn’t be lying. However, you would not believe them when they told you that *Mike and Eleven are the most boring and normal couple you’ll ever meet*. Because that, that would be a lie.

Mike and Eleven stood side by side, fingers intertwined together, in front of the gravestone.

Carl Thomas, it read. Born May 6th 1948. Died November 5th 1984.

There was no sentimental phrase below the dates.

They had been standing there for a while now, their car parked right outside Hawkins graveyard's big and rusty gate. Their parents were at home, waiting for them to come back from their small walk to have dinner. Their friends were also back in town, ready to share some news with them over a coffee at Benny's.

Life was normal. Life was okay. Nightmares were as often to them as they were to other people, people with no traumas. Nightmares were just bad dreams with no reality in them.

They were happy now. They had a good life. The gravestone was just a gravestone.

"He's still dead," Mike said out loud.

Eleven's fingers squeezed his as she nodded.

"Still dead," she agreed.

Mike looked at her. She looked back.

"I still love you," he said.

Eleven's lips curled into a tiny, happy smile.

"I still love you too."

Mike smiled back.

Little did Eleven know that Mike had a small box inside his black coat's pocket. And that inside that small box there was a ring. A beautiful, made of silver ring with a tiny green stone on it.

Little did Eleven know that in just seven months she would become Jane Wheeler.

"Let's go back?" Mike asked.

Eleven nodded.

They turned around and started walking away from the gravestone,

away from Carl Thomas' sad post-death existence.

Right when they crossed the graveyard's gate, Eleven stopped Mike.

"What's wrong?" He asked, worried.

Eleven went on her tiptoes and kissed her boyfriend on the lips.

"Nothing's wrong," she answered after pulling back. "Everything's okay."

Little did Mike know that in just one year and five months he would have his wife telling him in bed that he was going to be a dad.

Little did he know he would be a father to twins and they would be called James and Katie.

"Life is good," Mike said.

Eleven agreed.

Life was good. Life was normal for Mike Wheeler and Jane Hopper.

Notes for the Chapter:

So, this is it. Thank you so much for reading this story. I hope I didn't disappoint you in the end.
I'll be around with other Mileven stories.